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A bitter truth

INTRODUCTION

Avant-Garde Art and the Great War

The most public and familiar images of the First World War are found in the myriad memorials erected by nations with deaths to mourn. Everyone has encountered them, whether in a sequestered village churchyard or at the heart of a metropolis. The modest rural tributes often seem preferable to their imposing urban counterparts. Erected by small communities who lost the majority of their young men during the conflict, they focus on simple lists of names that remain moving in themselves, and testify to the sense of individual bereavement lodged at the centre of all such acts of remembrance.

Many of the grander monuments, however, are constrained by their commissioned, retrospective air. Aware of the need to console, and undoubtedly anxious to avoid offence, their very reticence is a limitation. The carved and modelled images they contain often appear merely dutiful, striving too hard for unimpeachable respectability. In most cases, they compare unfavourably with other works produced by artists who, having witnessed the war at first hand, felt impelled to define their experiences. Unlike the makers of routine memorials, they were engaged in an urgent task. Angered by the gap between the propagandist view of the struggle and the degradation of the trenches, they were driven by a determination to offer a corrective. Many were wounded themselves, or suffered severe breakdowns after exposure to the carnage at the Front. Some died, too soon to fulfil all the potential they had displayed before the war began.¹ But even when they emerged unscathed, in physical terms at least, the slaughter of so many compatriots ensured that their view of the conflict was radically removed from the enlistment posters sanctioned in their millions by governments and generals alike.

As its title indicates, this book centres above all on the work produced by avant-garde artists who, however diverse they may have been in nationality and ideological persuasion, were united by a desire to convey the rebarbative reality of war. The title comes from a phrase coined by Paul Nash, whose paintings and drawings of 1918 are definitive images of the battlefield at its most desolate. Nash had earlier been lucky to survive his spell as a second lieutenant in the trenches of St Eloi. Only three days after he was sent home with a broken rib, many of his fellow officers were decimated in a futile attack on Hill 60. His first watercolours of the Front were oddly lyrical, picturesque affairs, with names as inconsequential as *Chaos Decoratif*. After his return as an official war artist in November 1917, though, Nash's exposure to death led to a profound sense of moral disgust. Despite the comforts provided by a manservant and chauffeur-driven car, he insisted on travelling across the most devastated and dangerous areas of winter terrain where the Passchendaele campaign had just been fought. Appalled by the mud-clogged land-

scape, Nash reported that 'it is unspeakable, godless, hopeless. I am no longer an artist interested and curious, I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever. Feeble, inarticulate, will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls.'²

War catapulted Nash into a sudden, unexpected and formidable artistic maturity. Attempting to use oil paint for the first time in his career, he deployed this new resource to give his vision of hell a stricken conviction. But he was far from alone in transforming his work to meet the awesome challenge presented by the killing fields. More, perhaps, than any other conflict, the Great War had such a powerful effect on its participating artists that many of them produced an extraordinary range of eloquent work from the event. The primary emphasis in this book is on innovative painters, sculptors and print-makers of stature, who fought in the war and forced themselves to forge a form-language capable of conveying their response to the suffering. A considerable number of lesser-known and more academic artists are discussed as well, however. Apart from setting the avant-garde in a broader context, many of their war images prove that the negation of battle had the ability to generate within them work far more intense than anything they would go on to produce later in their careers.

Surprisingly enough, no attempt has previously been made to bring together and examine the international array of images elicited by the First World War. Studies exist of the art made in single countries, usually concentrating on official commissions; and monographic books on leading individuals inevitably take their war periods into account. There is, too, an abundance of literature which uses artists' work simply as an illustrative backdrop to discussions of historical or literary aspects of the conflict.³ But no one has devoted a book to an assessment for its own sake of the war art produced on both sides of the Atlantic, and the present volume hopes to make a start at redressing the balance.

Why do so many of the images spawned by the Great War carry such a potent charge? One answer surely lies in the unprecedented ferocity of the struggle. The full, battering force of twentieth-century weaponry was unleashed during the conflict's protracted course, and the result forced everyone involved to revise all their preconceptions about the nature of modern warfare. Machine-age armaments produced in immense quantities by highly organised industrial nations were capable of annihilation on a hitherto inconceivable scale, and the spiralling human cost rapidly came to seem out of all proportion to the infinitesimal military gains made on either side. The obscenity of what Ezra Pound condemned as 'the war waste',⁴ eventually

mounting to a tally of twelve million dead, created a deep-seated sense of incredulity, anger and revulsion. Anyone with a potent imagination was bound to be affected, and the generation which found itself embroiled in the fighting happened to contain an unusually high number of outstanding young artists.

For the outbreak of the Great War coincided with an exceptional period of ferment and innovative vitality in western painting and sculpture. The proliferation of avant-garde movements in the pre-war years had testified to a quickening pace, with vociferous and often highly competitive groups committing themselves to the principle of extreme renewal. Although the energy with which they pursued their insurrectionary goals was bound to be partially swallowed up in the sombre process of military enlistment, training and active service, an impressive range of artists refused to let the war prevent them from working altogether.

Even when ensnared in front-line engagements, they often showed great resourcefulness in using whatever materials came most readily to hand. While Léger executed a collaged painting on a fragment of wooden shell-crate, and Beckmann carried out a mural in a soldiers' delousing house, Gaudier-Brzeska stole an enemy's Mauser rifle and countered its 'powerful image of brutality' by breaking the butt off and carving in it a design which 'tried to express a gentler order of feeling'.⁵ Derain was equally adaptable, using discarded shell cases to make a series of mask-like metal sculptures, and Heckel painted a devotional image for Christmas 1915 on the side of an army tent. As for Klee, he regularly used his scissors to cut off the linen covering crashed planes and paint on it in his limited amount of spare time.

All the same, this ingenious harnessing of military materials could not solve the pressing problem of finding an adequate language. Seasoned academic artists like the redoubtable Lady Butler tried to produce images of the new war by bringing to the task all the conventions they had relied on when producing nineteenth-century battle-pieces. The outcome bore no relation to the barbarities of the campaign on the Western Front, and the wounding of her son at Ypres prompted Butler to admit that 'the gallant plumage, the glinting gold and silver' in her canvases 'have given way to universal grimness'.⁶ She failed to carry this insight over into her own work, but how could such 'grimness' be conveyed by other artists bent on responding to 'the biggest war the world has ever been stricken with'?⁷ As Samuel Hynes pointed out when discussing writers confronted with the same task, 'to represent the war in the traditional ways was necessarily to misrepresent it, to give it meaning, dignity, order, greatness... But there was as yet no other way to represent it'.⁸

Advanced modernist abstraction soon proved an inadequate starting-point for developing a viable approach to the conflict. Mondrian avoided the problem by refusing to disrupt his increasingly purist work with any references to the war. At the same time, Malevich quickly abandoned any thought of reconciling the austerity of newly fledged Suprematism with allusions to battle. Instead, he spent the first few months of hostilities producing anti-German propaganda based on the knockabout conventions of the popular *lubok* print. Dufy took a similar course of action in France, relying for his patriotic designs on the home-grown *image d'Epinal* tradition. Neither artist could sustain this enthusiasm for long, however. Malevich soon returned to austere experimentation, purged of all figurative belligerence. And even the buoyant Dufy could not pretend indefinitely that the war was a light-hearted adventure after producing a print in 1915 entitled, with risible optimism, *The End of the Great War*. Such callow triumphalism compared poorly with the contem-

poraneous work of Chagall, stranded in Vitebsk when hostilities broke out and convinced, from the outset, that the struggle would bring nothing but privation and bereavement.

Unpredictably enough, Chagall's admirable determination to view the onset of war with foreboding had been preceded well before battle commenced. When Meidner produced his extraordinary series of apocalyptic paintings in 1912, he was in no position to predict the advent of world conflict with any accuracy. But the disquieting fact remains that his visions, which dominated everything he produced for the next two years, all arise from a conviction that the world was threatened by a disaster of engulfing proportions. Meidner's seeming foresight should not obscure the fact that his paintings spring from a specific historical moment, when Germany was conscious of the threat of a major struggle. During the months of uneasy peace between the end of the first Balkan War in November 1912, and the commencement of its successor in June the following year, the most bellicose voices in the German press declared themselves in favour of war as 'the saviour, the physician'.⁹ Placing Meidner in this context does not, however, detract from his pre-war achievement. Without diluting his allegiance to Expressionism, he showed in these unnerving images how an avant-garde artist's work might be directed towards an awareness of the calamity ahead.

Expressionism's ability to lend itself to the subject of war, without any significant compromise, also helped Kandinsky to make a powerful sequence of pre-war apocalyptic paintings. Hence the readiness of so many German artists, when the war came, to make forceful images from their experience of the conflict. Although Beckmann, Grosz and Kirchner suffered nervous collapses during their army service, they still managed to base fierce and outspoken work on their suffering. So did Heckel, but his preparedness to rely on Runge's inspiration in his tent painting shows that even the Expressionists started modifying their innovatory zeal when confronted by the mounting devastation. Beckmann, whose early war pictures owed a great deal to the fervent harshness of Meidner, decided as the struggle wore on to draw strength from early German and Flemish masters like van der Weyden, Grünewald and van Orley.

Artists in other countries, whose work owed far more to Cubism than Expressionism, likewise underpinned their war images with precedents from the distant past. Both Man Ray in America and Lentulov in Russia declared a debt to Uccello's San Romano battle-pieces when they produced monumental paintings of fighting soldiers in 1914. Even Picasso, after incorporating newspaper reports of the Balkan struggles in Cubist collages, and then excluding overt war references from his subsequent work, suddenly began to echo Dufy's interest in the *image d'Epinal*. The change, announced in a spirited little drawing of Apollinaire at the Front, invaded his Cubist painting soon afterwards in the form of a patriotic faïence goblet. It looks incongruous among all the other, less representational forms in the picture, and may well reflect Picasso's ambivalent attitude towards the conflict. He certainly shunned the whole notion of producing war images over the next few years, but that initial flirtation with the *image d'Epinal* tradition did inaugurate a partial withdrawal in his work from modernist extremism. By the latter years of the war he was executing frankly Ingres-like portraits of friends in military uniforms, implicitly allying their valour with his own espousal of classicism.

Picasso's startling transformation was symptomatic of a general 'return to order' as the struggle against Germany intensified. Kenneth Silver's incisive book on French art in the First World War revealed just how widespread the reaction became, and how it was accompanied by a xenophobic tendency to equate avant-garde experiment with

'Boche' decadence.¹⁰ But the desire to renew nourishing connections with the past affected artists beyond France's borders as well. Nevinson, anticipating his friend Severini's flirtation with a more traditional alternative to Futurism in 1916, had moved towards a representational vocabulary the previous year. Unlike Severini, who retreated from war subjects altogether, Nevinson developed his revised style in order to deal more effectively with the scenes he had witnessed near the battlefield. First-hand exposure to the suffering persuaded him that Marinettian bravado was not equipped to convey the tragedy. Nor did a highly abstract language seem appropriate, now that he realised the importance of offering a comprehensible, hard-hitting alternative to the rhetoric of heroism pumped out by the propaganda system.

Throughout Europe, in fact, artists who had earlier been identified in differing ways with the innovative cause found themselves adopting less hermetic approaches. Goncharova, an enthusiastic pre-war apostle of Cubo-Futurism, relied extensively on traditional Russian precedents when she produced her *Mystical Images of War*. Temporarily abandoning his involvement with Expressionism at its most tortured and confessional, Kokoschka carried out a series of surprisingly objective studies at the Isonzo Front. Even Léger, whose active service did not prompt him to repudiate his previous affiliations, began to evolve a more plain-spoken, figurative idiom shorn of arcane pre-war complexities.

With the advent of 1916, a year of grotesque losses at Verdun and the Somme, artists began to develop an understandable obsession with what Beckmann described as 'this endless desolation'.¹¹ Their anguish was laced with a gathering compassion, leading a formerly self-absorbed artist like Schiele to view enemy prisoners-of-war with remarkable sympathy. By the autumn German casualties alone had amounted to a crushing total of 3,500,000, helping to explain why Lehmbrock deployed an elegiac approach to his *Fallen Man*, the forlorn antithesis of an invulnerable warrior. Barlach, who had greeted the conflict's outbreak in 1914 with a vengeful lithograph called *The Holy War*, now gave a pleading image the title *Dona Nobis Pacem*; and even the martial Balla became punch-drunk enough to produce a mournful painting entitled *Battleship + Widow + Wind*. Machine-age optimism, which had charged the Futurists with so much energy before 1914, gave way to a mortified awareness of mechanical weaponry's capacity for unlimited slaughter. Despair ran hand in hand with passionate indignation, and some artists now openly allied themselves with the pacifist cause. Grosz, invalidated out from the army but living with the continual fear of military recall, contributed anti-war drawings to pacifist publications like *Die Aktion* and Wieland Herzfelde's outspoken *Die Neue Jugend*. The equally polemical Masereel, having removed himself to neutral Switzerland, executed a forceful series of woodcuts where the death-agonies of young combatants in barbed-wire entanglements are scored harshly into the blocks.

There was little sign, among these increasingly uninhibited artists, of abstractionist loyalties. The persevering Albert-Birot, whose painting of *War* reduced the struggle to an almost diagrammatic essence, persisted in arguing against a figurative revival. Although Valensi did likewise in his *Expression of the Dardanelles*, the painting itself indicated that a high degree of abstraction militated against any attempt to convey a tragic vision of the war. Wyndham Lewis may have declared, in 1915, that 'there is no room, in praising the soldiers, for anything but an abstract hymn'.¹² But the latter stages of the conflict proved so repugnant that more and more artists turned to representational imagery fired by a protesting vehemence. Senior painters with no

personal experience of the conditions at the Front now felt driven to express their revulsion. Corinth's *Cain* is charged with such a wild, fervent anguish that it deserves to be ranked among the most powerful of all his later works. And Klimt, the artist least likely to make a direct painting about the war, subjected his earlier allegory of *Death and Life* to alterations drastic enough to convey his accelerating sense of gloom.

When governments started dispensing official war-artist commissions on a substantial scale, therefore, even the most avant-garde recipients were prepared to accept their patrons' inevitable demand for a more figurative idiom. Bomberg was virtually alone in finding his preliminary version of a memorial painting rejected on the grounds of obscurity. The tensions which arose were far more likely to focus on the artists' attitude towards the horror of war. Nevinson ran up against government censorship when he produced a painting of dead British soldiers, while the still more defiant Slevogt incurred disapproval on the other side when the German government banned his commissioned sequence of prints called *Visions*.

By no means all these officially sponsored images put forward an oppositional view of the conflict. Many of them were harmlessly topographical, and the first British war artist later confessed that his appointment 'resulted in rather prosaic work'.¹³ Even so, there was a notable absence of triumphal afflatus in most of the large-scale canvases executed for proposed memorial buildings in both London and Ottawa. Too many young men had died; and Sargent's *Gassed*, intended as the focal point of the London scheme, summed up the prevailing mood of elegiac stoicism. The jubilation which greeted the Armistice throughout the allied nations was short-lived. In its place, a sense of relieved exhaustion soon prevailed.

On the defeated side, no such quietism could be found. In humiliated Germany paintings of crippled servicemen proliferated. Dix, who had begun the war ablaze with a Nietzschean belief in the need for purgative destruction, now consented to exhibit with the Dadaists. In the early 1920s he concentrated on painting savagely deformed victims of war, playing cards, crouching on pavements and staring enviously at the prostitutes who parade past them with open contempt. Grosz continued to vilify militarism in his elaborate and unbridled canvases, which take a Hogarthian relish in anathematizing the evils of the Weimar Republic and, a little later, the rise of Fascism. But Dix produced some of the greatest images of the war itself in an extended cycle of prints. They constitute the culmination of the ambitious print sequences which German artists like Jaeckel, Pechstein, Schubert, Slevogt, Uzarski and Kollwitz had published in previous years. Impressive though they all were, Dix's tersely entitled *War* outstrips them in its ability to probe the darkest and most disturbing recesses of a conflict he had witnessed at close quarters for several gruelling years.

Only in retrospect, then, could Dix arrive at a definitive summation of all his complex emotions about the struggle. Relying as much on his admiration for Urs Graf, Grünewald, Callot and Goya as it does on Expressionism, *War* brilliantly exemplifies the peculiar fusion of modernity and tradition which he, more than any other artist, required in order to expose the bestiality of the battle terrain. He paid the price for his temerity, however. Only one set of *War* found a buyer when it was published in 1924, and a few years later his equally unrestrained painting of *The Trench* was destroyed by Nazis bent on expunging all such admissions of misery, decay and extinction.

Other German artists, including Gies, Barlach and Scharl, also found that their war images were despised for supposed defeatism. Since the militarism resurgent in Hitler's Germany branded such

work as degenerate, formidable courage was required for Dix to persist in producing his excoriating *War Triptych* under the threat of dismissal from his teaching post. Banned from exhibiting altogether in 1934, he nevertheless located one more major painting in the Western Front. *Flanders* continues to present an image of demoralization, even though Dix must have guessed that within a year of its completion hundreds of his works would be confiscated by the Fascists. In his art, the whole notion of 'a bitter truth' takes its most unsparing form. Ultimately, though, Dix's stubborn insistence on confronting even the most repugnant aspects of the war has a cathartic effect. As Julian Barnes wrote of Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*: 'Catastrophe has become art; but this is no reducing process. It is freeing, enlarging, explaining.'¹⁴

Artists from the allied nations, by contrast, finally succeeded in arriving at a redemptive state of peace. Spencer, having refused the government's invitation in 1919 to produce more than one painting based on his memories of the Macedonian campaign, subsequently found himself able to conceive and execute an entire cycle of murals

in the Sandham Memorial Chapel. Here, in a building designed for the purpose, violence and death give way to affirmations of soldierly brotherhood and the culminating prospect of resurrection above the altar. Like Dix, Spencer had needed time to meditate on his war experience before summoning up the physical and imaginative stamina which his sustained achievement in the Burghclere chapel demanded.

Just as any study of art and the Great War ought to begin well before hostilities were declared, so it should terminate with work executed long after the Armistice. The ultimate resolution of the tragedy was attained as late as 1938, when Brancusi's memorial to Tirgu-Jiu's repulsion of the German invaders received its formal unveiling in an elaborate ceremony of dedication and remembrance. Although another world war was about to commence, its outbreak does not invalidate Brancusi's great sculptural ensemble. In a monumental assertion of love's healing power, the *Table of Silence*, the *Gate of the Kiss* and the *Endless Column* are crowned, at last, by an image of resilience and fortitude stretching defiantly into the Rumanian sky.