

ART AND WAR

AUSTRALIA, BRITAIN AND CANADA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR



Interpreting the war: Australia's Second World War art

The Australian War Memorial's original purpose was to commemorate the 60,000 Australians who had fought and died overseas during the First World War; however, by the time the building opened on Armistice Day, 1941, the nation was involved in another world war, with official war artists already appointed and, indeed, at work in the Middle East. Both a shrine and a museum, the Memorial aimed to give people a better understanding of war through the display of "relics" such as uniforms or military artefacts, official and private records, photographs, and the commissioned works of art.

The success of the First World War art program, based on the British and Canadian war art schemes, made it an appropriate model for the Second World War scheme. The new program eventually expanded to 35 artists, including for the first time three women. The scheme was originally run by the Department of the Interior, but in 1941 control of the scheme, including the appointment of artists, was transferred to the Memorial.

The key figures in managing and shaping the art scheme were all veterans of the First World War: all had experiences in collecting relics and records and had been closely involved in the Memorial's development. The Memorial's Art Committee had three members: Charles Bean (the Australian official war historian); General Sir Harry Chauvel (the Australian commander in Egypt and Palestine during the First World War); and Louis McCubbin (an artist, who was also director of the Art Gallery of South Australia).

With the assistance of the conservative Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, the Art Committee created lists of potential artists. McCubbin had firm views on what was required: younger artists were to be preferred to those who had already been appointed once before, and the art was to express the emotional side of war rather than just be documentary. For his part, Bean supported shorter appointments, to provide opportunity for more artists, and thus a more varied interpretation, across a number of categories: portraits, figures, genre, industry, landscape and marine subjects.

Like Bean and McCubbin, Lieutenant Colonel John Treloar, the Memorial's second director, had been involved in collecting for the future Memorial during the First World War. With the outbreak of the Second World War he was seconded to the Military History Section (MHS), which had been established to collect records. Treloar recommended the attachment of artists to the MHS to avoid interference by military headquarters. As the official war artist program developed, he was to take on a more active role.

Conflict soon arose between Treloar and Arthur Bazley, the Memorial's acting director, who had been in France as Bean's assistant during the First World War. They disagreed

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over the appointment and management of artists, duration of appointments, and payment to women artists.

While the first appointments were of conservative artists, each was a superb draughtsman and technician. Ivor Hele was sent to the Middle East, where he spent a year following the troops, revelling in the action and the closeness to the men. Like Will Dyson in the First World War, he focused on drawing and painting the Australian soldier. But he also painted landscapes, such as Central Square, Tobruk, his most impressionistic work, painted in shades of pink and mauve. Although he developed eye problems owing to the harsh desert conditions, he continued as an official war artist until the end of the war, travelling twice to New Guinea to capture the grim experience of jungle warfare. His dark, dank palette and the gritty subject matter are evident in Battlefield burial of three NCOs, where hunched soldiers dispassionately watch a burial scene.

Lyndon Dadswell was another early appointment; his work runs from the expected figurative to the more experimental. He sustained a severe head wound while serving as a soldier in the Middle East and was sent back to Australia, where he completed a series of plasters of heroic infantrymen and munition workers. Owing to wartime shortages, these were not cast in bronze until decades later. In Greece Dadswell departs from his naturalism and explores a synthesis of geometric shapes that unites the three soldiers into a dynamic marching force.

These early appointments tested the program and raised many issues: the relationship with the military, status of artists, working conditions, length of employment, availability of art materials, transport and accommodation, rates of pay, access to the front line, employment of traditional versus contemporary artists, and uncertainty about the results.

The experience of Colin Colahan demonstrated the need for artists to have military status and the British granted him the honorary rank of captain “to enable him to paint in prohibited areas without military escort”. He covered the activities of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in Britain, and later the Allied forces as they travelled across Europe pursuing the retreating German forces. His tonal-impressionism can be seen in Ballet of wind and rain; painted quickly, it is refreshing in its handling of light and watery hues.

The decision to appoint women artists highlighted the issue of payment. Treloar’s patronising attitude reflected one view: “it is not practicable for the woman painter to render the same services as a man. She cannot be expected to endure the same hardships or to live under the same conditions, and therefore the equality of service which is supposed to deserve equality of pay does not arise.” Bazley disagreed: “If the women are paid less than the men – despite the fact that the women will not go into the forward zones – the art societies will take up the question & the results will be embarrassment for the Govt ... And the quality of the work done by the women will probably equal that of

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the men.” In the end, the Minister of the Interior decided that the artists were all professionals and should therefore receive the same rate.

Heysen, the first woman to win the prestigious Archibald Prize for portraiture, was selected to record the efforts of the nurses and the newly formed women’s services. Her seven months in New Guinea were frustrating, and she was thwarted in her attempts to go to the forward areas. Returning to Australia with severe dermatitis, she was chastised by Treloar for painting frivolous subjects instead of concentrating on the hard work of the nurses. Fortunately, McCubbin intervened and her appointment was extended. Stella Bowen, the second female official artist, arrived at RAF Station Binbrook in 1944 and began drawings of a mostly Australian Lancaster bomber crew. The loss of the crew that same night made her determined to complete the group portrait, Bomber crew. It commemorates the death of many young men during the missions over Europe.

The Art Committee and Treloar, despite all their worthy intentions, were a conservative group. In 1944 they began to acknowledge the need to broaden the selection of artists; however, they only sought the advice of the hide-bound Australian Academy of Art, who provided four artists to be the representatives on an advisory panel to the Art Committee. This outraged members of the broader-based Contemporary Art Society (CAS), who had long lobbied for a greater role in the appointment of artists. The latter thought their group better represented the art community, and the more modernist aesthetic, encompassing surrealism, figurative expressionism and social realism, of younger artists such as Sidney Nolan and Yosl Bergner.

Nolan, eager for appointment, had invited Treloar to an exhibition of his work, but the distorted and anguished figure on the invitation did little to impress him. Nolan, a conscript, was posted to an army camp at Dimboola, in rural Victoria. Dream of a latrine sitter shows a bleak and dreary view of military life, the forms pared down to mere outlines, and the figure of the soldier, naked, vulnerable, sitting on a latrine beside a rifle range. This is one of the few works that gives voice to the total despondency of the artist thrust into the inappropriate role of soldier. Bergner’s weary group of labourers in Tocumwal – loading the train are members of Australian labour companies. Bergner, a Jewish refugee, was strongly committed to painting the socially disadvantaged and created desolate and forlorn images of refugees, the unemployed, and destitute Aborigines. His almost monochrome palette and huddled forms reflect the work of those Australian artists keen to depict the darker side of life. Unsurprisingly, neither Nolan nor Bergner was appointed a war artist.

Attempts by the Memorial to appoint artists that would appease the CAS were frustrated by their unavailability. William Dobell, preoccupied with private commissions, proved elusive, although he later joined the Civil Constructional Corps as a labourer and camouflage artist. Ill-health and other commitments prevented Russell Drysdale’s appointment. With artists now being awarded repatriation rights, any physical disability was enough to rule someone out and Drysdale was blind in one eye.

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In 1945 the Memorial, reacting to continued pressure from the CAS, appointed three modernist artists: Donald Friend, Sali Herman, and Sybil Craig. Friend's Japanese suicide raid is a sensual composition of jumbled bodies. The pyre with its sheet of metal hanging like a flag, along with the lurid sky through which the moon appears, is evidence of his close working relationship with Drysdale. In *Desolate plantation, Balikpapan*, the blasted landscape appears surreal: a group of military tents sits amid "blackened stalks of palm". Herman went to New Guinea and captured an exotic element in his paintings through his use of the colourful palette evident in *Stretcher-bearers*. With its flatter forms and perspective, colourful loin cloths worn by the stretcher-bearers, and lush green jungle, the work gives no evidence of war, save for the soldier toting a weapon. As wartime manpower initiatives were enforced, women were needed in the workforce. Sybil Craig was specifically appointed to paint the women in the munitions factory at Maribyrnong, in Victoria. Her palette is light and colourful, a far cry from the dingy, dangerous work undertaken by the women. *No. 1 projectile shop (Commonwealth Ordnance Factory, Maribyrnong)* captures them at work on heavy machinery.

Being a prisoner of the Japanese did not prevent Murray Griffin from painting and drawing many pitiful scenes of physical deprivation. *Roberts Hospital*, despite its grim subject matter, demonstrates Griffin's interest in colour and composition. As materials became scarce, he continued to draw on anything, even prising sheets of hardboard from the ceilings, so determined was he to provide a pictorial history of the men's struggle for survival.

The Memorial's art collection has been misinterpreted for decades by some critics who see it as illustrative rather than interpretive. Although illustrations do exist, they are only a small part of a rich and diverse collection. Despite the conservative preference of Treloar and the Art Committee for a figurative art that was recognisable rather than obscure, the collection demonstrates a history of the struggles Australian artists faced both with difficult subject matter and the changing modernist aesthetic.

The Second World War collection has arisen from many sources. Apart from the Memorial's officially appointed and administered artists, the MHS seconded artists already enlisted in the army, navy or air force. Works also came into the Memorial's collection through independent schemes initiated by the RAAF War History Section, Royal Australian Navy Historical Records Section, and the Allied Works Council. Over the years the collection has been augmented by the acquisition of works by non-commissioned artists. Taken together, it offers a diverse interpretation of Australia's involvement in war and its impact on society.

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