

# Art (Australia)

By Margaret Hutchison

**Artistic responses to Australia's war effort were diverse and engaging. Soldiers sketching what they experienced of the 1915 Gallipoli campaign produced some of the earliest images of the conflict. During the war, the first official art scheme was established and employed Australian artists to capture a particularly Australian experience of the fighting. Unofficial responses, primarily created by women artists, offset the narrow official representation of the conflict, including the war experience behind the lines. However, it was during the interwar years that many of the most iconic images of Australia's war experience were created.**

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## Introduction

Painting and drawing were an important part of the visual record of the First World War. Whether employed by the official [art](#) scheme or sketching from personal inclination, artists produced a rich and eclectic array of art in response to [Australia's](#) involvement in the war. Soldiers at [Gallipoli](#) created early images, while an official art scheme emerged later, under which paintings were commissioned to capture a particularly Australian experience of war. At the same time, individuals created images without official commissions, representing their personal experience of the war in sketches and paintings of scenes behind the lines and far from the fighting front. In so doing, these artists broadened the representation of Australia's participation in the conflict.

## Early Images of Australians in the First World War

Some of the earliest images of Australia's war experience came from the men of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) fighting at Gallipoli. Soldiers sketched their experience of the peninsula under dangerous conditions and with limited art supplies, depicting the horror of the fighting and the humour of the troops.<sup>[1]</sup> Signaller [Ellis Silas \(1885-1972\)](#), who was among the soldiers that landed at Gallipoli on the first day, drew what he saw of the conflict during his time on the peninsula in his [diary](#) and sketchbook, later published in 1916 as *Crusading at ANZAC, anno domini 1915*.<sup>[2]</sup> His aim was to depict “[w]ar as the soldier sees it, shorn of all its pomp and circumstance.”<sup>[3]</sup> He sketched the daily life of the troops on the peninsula, portraying both its mundane and horrific aspects; the landing boats filled with Australian soldiers, his first dugout, men bathing under fire, a field dressing station, the casualties at Bloody Angle, a roll call at Quinn's Post. Death is ever present in these images, and Silas himself noted that this was not from “morbid sensationalism” but because “the dead ... were a part of our daily life” and “the character of the Peninsula.”<sup>[4]</sup> One such sketch that captures this element is *At the Water Hole* (1915) where he shows men who had been wounded or killed near a watering hole in an attempt to fill their containers. Silas annotated this image with a grim comment, “one must drink, even if the price be death.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Other images created by soldiers at Gallipoli were included in *The Anzac Book*, a collection of satiric sketches and writings published in May 1916. [Charles Bean \(1879-1968\)](#), Australia's official war correspondent and later official historian, edited the collection. Scholars have seen the collection as one of the ways in which Bean began to shape a legend of [Anzac](#). Unlike Silas' images, these sketches largely avoid any depictions of the fighting on the peninsula and instead focus on the patriotism and irreverent wit of the Australian troops.<sup>[6]</sup> Private [David Barker's \(1888-1946\)](#) work epitomised these themes. His illustration for the cover of the collection portrays a soldier standing in front of a tattered Union Jack with a look of determination and pride, depicting the dual loyalties of Australians during this period to [Empire](#) and nation. Another image of a grinning and toothless Australian soldier smoking a cigarette, drolly entitled *At the Landing and Here Ever Since* (1915), captures the “larrikin” humour for which Australian troops at Gallipoli became renowned.

## Official War Art

In May 1917, Australia, like many other belligerent nations, established an official war art scheme to create a more comprehensive record of the war in art. The programme was the first comprehensive government funded art project of the nascent nation, comparable only to the Historic Memorials Committee established in 1911. It emerged during a period of increased commemorative activity. Plans for an official art scheme, based on the Canadian and British models formed in 1916, evolved at the same time the [Australian government](#) was discussing proposals for the development of a wider collection of war records to be housed in a national war museum. Subsequently, the commissioning of official art was divided between two major collecting bodies in London, the Australian High Commission's National War Records Office (NWRO) set up in 1916 to collect records for a future museum and the Australian War Records Section (AWRS) formed a year later in May 1917 under the authority of the Department of Defence, which was tasked with collecting records of military value for historical research as well as a national war museum.<sup>[7]</sup>

[Will Dyson \(1880-1938\)](#), an expatriate cartoonist, was among the first to suggest that the services of artists might be used in an official capacity to create a record of the AIF in the war. Approaching Australia's High Commissioner in London, [Andrew Fisher \(1862-1928\)](#), in August 1916, Dyson offered to sketch the "special Australian characteristics" of the troops in [France](#).<sup>[8]</sup> Fisher, a keen patron of Australian art, strongly recommended to Minister for Defence [George Pearce \(1870-1952\)](#) that Dyson be granted permission to travel to the [Western Front](#) to create images of Australian troops stationed there.<sup>[9]</sup>

Yet, although Fisher found support for Dyson's proposal amongst Australian politicians and military leaders, he faced opposition from the British. The War Office saw Dyson's idea as unnecessary considering that [Muirhead Bone \(1876-1953\)](#), the British official artist appointed under Wellington House in July 1916, was already at the front making sketches of the British Forces. To contend with this, Major-General [William Birdwood \(1865-1951\)](#), commander of the I ANZAC Corps, granted Dyson an honorary commission within the AIF and in December 1916 he became Australia's first official war artist — though he was not officially recognised as such until May 1917 when the government formally sanctioned the establishment of an art scheme at the same time as the establishment of the AWRS.<sup>[10]</sup>

At the urging of [Arthur Streeton \(1867-1943\)](#), a prominent and outspoken Australian landscape artist, Dyson's proposal was later expanded to incorporate ten Australian artists drawn from the expatriate community in London who were all also given honorary commissions within the AIF. This section was overseen by [Henry Smart \(1874- c.1951\)](#), the publicity officer at Australia House, and by the end of the war had employed many of the leading Australian artists including [George Bell \(1878-1966\)](#), [Charles Bryant \(1883-1937\)](#), [Henry Fullwood \(1863-1930\)](#), [George Lambert \(1873-1930\)](#), [Fred Leist \(1873-1945\)](#), [John Longstaff \(1861-1941\)](#), [Harold Septimus Power \(1877-1951\)](#), [James Quinn \(1869-1951\)](#) and Streeton.

The second aspect of the art scheme had its origins in a proposal by Bean to employ *Anzac Book* artists to sketch what they saw of the fighting in France. As editor of *The Anzac Book*, he had become aware of the artistic talent within the AIF and motivated by its success - the book sold around 104,000 copies by 1916 - he began to consider the potential for soldiers with artistic talent to be commissioned to sketch and paint what they saw of the war for a national collection.<sup>[11]</sup> He was inspired by the drawings of Private Frank Crozier (1883-1948), one of the contributors to *The Anzac Book*, who had made numerous notes and sketches of the fighting at Pozières and its surroundings, which Bean claimed “were most accurate and well drawn.” Consequently, at the same time Dyson was offering to sketch the AIF, Bean began to lobby the Australian government to commission Crozier and other *Anzac Book* artists, such as Barker, Private Cyril Leyshon-White (1896-1962) and Private Frederick Collis (1887-1952), whose pseudonym was Ted Colles, to sketch “what they actually saw” of the war for a national collection of war art.<sup>[12]</sup>

Overseen by John Treloar (1894-1952), who was in charge of the AWRS and later became director of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) from 1920-1952, Bean’s proposal was expanded in 1917 and he was invited to act as advisor to both art sections as Representative of the AIF. Despite Bean’s suggestions, only Crozier was employed from among the *Anzac Book* artists, while four other soldiers were commissioned from the AIF including George Benson (1886-1960), Will Longstaff (1879-1953), Louis McCubbin (1890-1952) and James Scott (1877-1932), all talented and well-known artists in their own right. These men were tasked with drawing their surroundings whenever they could be spared from military duties and were also trained in [camouflage](#). In addition, two sculptors were added to this section in 1918, Web Gilbert (1867-1925) and Wallace Anderson (1888-1975), who later created diorama and sculptures for the AWM.<sup>[13]</sup>

## The Role and Function of Official Art

At a time when many Australians held dual loyalties to the British Empire and to the nation, the art scheme aimed to capture a particularly Australian war experience within that of a wider imperial one. Both Bean’s and Dyson’s ideas for a collection of war art emphasised the importance of the work being undertaken by Australians. Dyson was adamant that only Australian artists could capture the characteristics of the AIF in France and consequently only artists from the Dominion were employed. This was distinct from other art schemes, such as the Canadian one, which, as Laura Brandon argues, intended “to use the most talented people to reflect the best art of the day.”<sup>[14]</sup> Bean later proudly stated that the Canadians had “been on the wrong lines” because they had employed several “English artists of the fashionable sort to paint their national pictures.” He argued that in comparison the Australians had created a more appropriate national collection by employing only “enthusiastic young men doing their best to help their country’s record.”<sup>[15]</sup>

Limiting commissions to Australian artists was one way of producing not only a visual record of Australia’s war experience but also a record of Australian art itself during this period. This was a popular idea at the time and the Australian press reported that Sir Luke Fildes (1844-1927), a

renowned British painter and advisor to the Australian art scheme during the war, approved of the decision to “confine the work to Australian artists, as tending to develop native art” in the dominion.<sup>[16]</sup> The government also saw the official war paintings commissioned under the scheme as a testament to the character of Australian art in this period. When the full cost of an official scheme became apparent in 1917 there was some debate as to its necessity. However, the Department of Defence acknowledged that because of the diversity of subjects offered by the conflict, a collection of official paintings would form a useful “record of the stage which Australian Art had reached at the time of the war.”<sup>[17]</sup> As a result there was a strong nationalist focus to the Australian scheme and the artists it employed and the subjects it commissioned.

Bean, Smart and Treloar saw the Australian official collection of art as functioning as part of the “pictorial record,” which included [photography](#) and [film](#), of Australian soldiers in the war for posterity. The British scheme embraced official painting for its publicity and record value, emphasizing its role as “propaganda there and then,” but also “as a historical record for the future.”<sup>[18]</sup> Yet, although Bean suggested in 1917 that the paintings might be used to increase Australia’s recruitment numbers, this was not the central aim for paintings during the war and instead Smart and Treloar emphasised their role as an accurate record and appropriate memorial.<sup>[19]</sup> Unlike the British, who separated their art into “factual and accurate depictions” and canvases “commemorative in theme,” the Australian scheme emphasised accuracy in both artists’ smaller sketches and large-scale paintings.<sup>[20]</sup> Plans for the art to be exhibited in a picture gallery attached to an Australian war museum later evolved and the art was incorporated throughout the AWM’s displays when it finally opened in April 1922, in contrast to other nations, like the Canadians, who planned a special gallery for the art to stand as a memorial in its own right.<sup>[21]</sup>

## The Artist as Eyewitness to War

There was a profound emphasis on the eyewitness value of Australian official art and Bean, Smart and Treloar believed that the accuracy of the sketches was guaranteed by artists’ proximity to and observation of the fighting. Both Dyson’s and Bean’s proposals had emphasised the value of artists drawing the battlefield from their firsthand impressions of the war. To this end, official artists employed by the NWRO were given an honorary commission in the AIF and sent to theatres of war where Australians were stationed for up to three months. All were sent to the Western Front, except Lambert who was sent to Palestine to sketch the Australian troops fighting there. They were paid £1 a day, later increased to £2, which was more than was received by officers of the equivalent rank, and lived alongside the soldiers at the front for periods of up to three months.

These artists were tasked with creating twenty-five sketches of what they observed of the conflict which would become the property of the Australian government. From the sketches artists made at the front, they were commissioned to paint larger canvases of scenes significant to Australia’s wartime history on their return to London. Streeton’s works were, as Ann Galbally argues, no less

than a “visual transcription” of what he saw while in France.<sup>[22]</sup> He described the scenes of the [Somme Valley](#) he witnessed, commenting particularly on the “view of the valley with a flat covered with lovely trees and the Somme winding through and the towers of the old church [of Corbie] a grand spread, and in the area of battle a shell burst.”<sup>[23]</sup> This is just as he sketched and later painted the scene, with the fighting appearing as puffs of smoke on the horizon and the village with the church nestled at the bottom of the twisting Somme valley.

The artists employed by the AWRS, unlike the NWRO artists, had direct combat experience and their work provides a vivid insight into what they experienced at the front. Similarly to Silas’ images of Gallipoli, several of their sketches captured the more confronting aspects of the war. Crozier’s poignant image, *The Search for Identity Discs* (c.1917-1918), depicts a soldier searching the body of a dead combatant to find his identity. Will Longstaff’s wartime sketchbook contains a colour study of a dead soldier, while a second image depicts a leg severed at the knee, a bone protruding from a mess of flesh and cloth — the composition with the severed limb at its centre contrasts sharply with a grassy field of poppies in the background and emphasises the human cost of war.<sup>[24]</sup>

## Themes

Artists were not formally restricted in the subjects they depicted while at the front but were expected to paint in their specialist genre. As a result, the images produced during the war ranged from intimate scenes of soldiers and portraits of military officials to detailed sketches of military equipment. Artists’ studies of the war-ravaged landscape and destroyed buildings, like the British and Canadian images, became allegories for the devastation of the conflict. The focus of much of the art produced during this period was on the army on the Western Front, though Lambert’s images of the Light Horse in the [Middle East](#) and Bryant’s paintings of the navy provided a counterpoint to this. After the war, the AWM commissioned large-scale canvases of scenes significant to the wartime history of Australia. In an attempt to supplement the smaller images produced during the conflict and to create a more comprehensive collection, many of these later commissions focused on battles at which artists had not been present. However, the rapidly gathered sketches and drawings made by artists at the front have an immediacy that is not found in the larger canvases produced after the war and these wartime images remain an integral part of Australia’s artistic response to the First World War.

## Style

Out of step with the more modernist styles embraced by the Canadian and British art schemes, the paintings of the Australian programme reflected the practices and tastes in art which prevailed in the Dominion. Artists working for the Australian scheme largely rejected the modernist trends sweeping Europe, returning to the academic style in which they had been trained in pre-Federation Australia as a way of representing the gravity of the war.<sup>[25]</sup> As a result, while many of their British and Canadian contemporaries searched for an appropriate visual language to portray the horror they saw at the

front, Australian artists favoured a descriptive style that privileged colour, tone and “harmonious composition”.<sup>[26]</sup> Bean was deeply critical of the Canadian official art, declaring that the modern style of some of the paintings constituted “freak art.”<sup>[27]</sup> He condemned the Canadian paintings and praised the Australian collection, arguing that “while the Canadian pictures fill the Royal Academy with a very interesting exhibit of curious styles of contemporary art,” it was the Australian paintings that were “a far more interesting set, and a suitable memorial — about 1,000 sketches and small pictures of what the artists actually saw at the front.”<sup>[28]</sup>

## Unofficial War Art

### Women Artists

While Bean, Smart and Treloar supported a somewhat narrow conception of “war art” under the official scheme, the work of unofficial artists challenged this limited view. Expatriate female artists, who had been overlooked in official commissions for the art scheme despite Streeton’s proposals, produced images of the war that broadened the representation it received in officially commissioned works. Although women were employed under the British and Canadian official art schemes, it was not until 1920 with Florence Rodway’s (1881-1971) commission to paint a portrait of General William Bridges (1861-1915) that the Australian art scheme employed a female artist — though the Canadians, as Catherine Speck argues, have been criticised for directing official female artists to paint only women’s war work.<sup>[29]</sup>

The images women created were diverse and arresting, capturing a range of subjects from camp life behind the lines to the personal cost of war. Iso Rae (1860-1940), an artist living in France at the outbreak of the war and a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment of the British Red Cross, made numerous sketches of the Étaples army base camp. Her delicate and evocative images capture the rhythms of camp life. In *Cinema Cue* (1916) where Rae presents lines of soldiers waiting in the dusk to view a film, the glowing interior of the buildings contrasting starkly with the darkness within which the men linger. Hilda Rix Nicholas (1884-1961) captured the personal effect of war in *A Mother of France* (1914) where she depicted the pain and suffering of those left behind. She commented that this mother, who had lost a husband in the Franco-Prussian War and two sons in the First World War, was “resigned to her existence but not broken by it.”<sup>[30]</sup>

### The War at Home

Although London was the centre of the collection of official war art during the conflict, efforts were made in Australia to establish a similar programme or branch of the official scheme. The Historic Memorials Committee suggested to the Department of Defence in 1918 that artists might be appointed to paint the war in Australia. A list of potential subjects was drawn up which focused on “Australian Activities and the Australian Imperial Force - in Australia.” These included shipbuilding,

camp life, military [hospitals](#), processions and military activities relating to visiting Allied soldiers.<sup>[31]</sup>

However, no comprehensive programme was established in Australia equivalent to the scheme in London and artists working from their own volition rather than for official commissions captured the home front. [Grace Cossington Smith \(1892-1984\)](#) was one such artist to paint her impressions of life in wartime Australia. Her most iconic painting, *The Sock Knitter* (1915), was the first of her canvases to be exhibited and, influenced by the work of European artists such as [Paul Cézanne \(1839-1906\)](#) and [Vincent van Gogh \(1853-1890\)](#), is often regarded as the first entirely post-impressionist work produced in Australia.<sup>[32]</sup> Cossington Smith's image portrays her sister, Madge, knitting socks for soldiers at the front, affording a glimpse of women's wartime experience on the home front. She also captured other elements of the role of women in her painting *Reinforcements: Troops Marching* (c.1917) which shows women waving off Australian soldiers, alluding to the place of women in the bitter conscription debates which divided Australia during the war.<sup>[33]</sup>

## Post-War Art

While the First World War stimulated an outpouring of artistic responses, some of Australia's most iconic images of the conflict were created in its aftermath. During the interwar years the official art scheme was transferred from London to Australia, the two sections merging under the authority of the AWM's Art Committee in 1919, which continued to commission art into the late 1930s. George Lambert's most famous paintings were created in this period and came to dominate a national memory of the war. His canvas, *Anzac the Landing, 1915* (1920-1922), immortalized one of the most celebrated episodes in Australia's history of the war, capturing the first moments of dawn on 25 April 1915, as the 3rd Brigade struggled up the steep cliffs at Gallipoli. Equally, his image *A Sergeant of the Light Horse* (1920), held by the National Gallery of Victoria, became the embodiment of the Anzac legend, typifying the Australian soldier of the First World War as a sinewy, sensitive fighter from the bush.

One of the best-known images to capture the sentiment of the interwar years is Will Longstaff's *The Menin Gate at Midnight* (1927) acquired by the AWM in 1927. Inspired by Longstaff's vision of the ghosts rising from the [battlefields of Ypres](#), the painting depicts the road outside the [Menin Gate](#) filled with a procession of shadowy soldiers. Imbued with a spiritualism popular in the decades following the war, this painting captured the imagination of a community in mourning and was reproduced in numerous publications – approximately 1,000 times in 1928 alone – as those who were left behind attempted to come to terms with the consequences of the conflict.<sup>[34]</sup>

## Conclusion

Whether in Streeton's sweeping canvases or Rae's intimate sketches, artists presented the horror of the fighting, the character of the Australian troops and the personal cost of war. The official art scheme that emerged during the conflict was the first in a long tradition of sending artists to theatres

of conflict where Australians fought – a practice that has endured into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It framed the way Australian artists have represented subsequent wars and it shaped a national collection that continues to play an important role in the way Australians interpret their country's involvement in conflict. However, the emphasis on capturing Australia's military efforts in official war art meant that a broader and more inclusive representation of the nation's involvement in the First World War was overlooked, one which might have incorporated the role of women and the home front. As a result, it was unofficial artists, primarily women, who captured this wider experience of the war in their art.

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## Notes

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17. ↑ *Minutes of the Department of Defence*, c.1918, AWM93 8/2/23.

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29. ↑ Speck, Catherine: *Painting Ghosts: Australian Women Artists in Wartime*, Melbourne 2004, pp. 23-32.
30. ↑ Hilda Rix Nicholason cited in *ibid.*, p. 60.
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### **Citation**

Hutchison, Margaret: Art (Australia) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-10-01. **DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.10738](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10738).

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