Centenary (Visual Arts)

By Paul Gough

The commemorative period between 2014 and 2018 was marked globally by numerous exhibitions of original artworks that had been commissioned and created during and immediately after World War 1. Most national and state museums and galleries also curated comprehensive survey shows of original work from the period; some curators took a thematic approach, some designed new permanent exhibits, and a significant number created innovative opportunities for contemporary artists to reflect on the centenary through the creation of artefacts, installations and exhibitions.

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Introduction

A century ago, the Canadian newspaper magnate and entrepreneur Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook) (1879-1964) envisioned a Hall of Remembrance for central London. He intended an equally grand building for Ottawa in Canada. Each would house a collection of fine art commissioned during the war and would be displayed as a permanent reminder of the conflict. The centrepiece of the London display would be Gassed, John Singer Sargent's (1856-1925) vast canvas of troops
blinded by mustard gas. Either side of the American painter’s work were to be a flank of canvases by the leading British artists of the period: Paul Nash (1889-1946), C.W.R. Nevinson (1889-1946), Stanley Spencer (1891-1959), and others. In Ottawa, the Memorial Hall was designed to house canvases by Canadian and British artists, a symbolic showcase of a unified Empire.

The London Hall of Remembrance was not built, nor was the Canadian Memorial. However, the commissioned paintings, prints, drawings and sculptures survived and are still housed in the national war museums in each country. Although many are in storage, they form a significant survey of early twentieth century art. Indeed, Beaverbook could be regarded as having shifted the very nature of public support for the arts in the English-speaking world. Under his tutelage, the Ministry of Information and its Canadian equivalent, the War Memorial Fund, protected and promoted emerging artists, brought intellectual coherence to a previously haphazard program of commissioning, and instigated a revolution in social patronage. Significantly, the scheme triggered similar state-sponsored projects in Australia and New Zealand and eventually gave support to selected indigenous artists who prospered from government patronage and purchasing.[1]

A century later, many of those same museums and their leadership teams – in London, Ottawa, Auckland, Canberra – revisited their collections, selected a cross-section of important works, and staged landmark exhibitions during the commemorative period 2014-2018. Such state-endorsed retrospective exhibitions are at the core of the curatorial achievements of the commemorative period. Every country that fought in World War 1 held a historical exhibition in its most hallowed and respected institutions. Furthermore, many governments and national arts councils took the opportunity to commission and engage today’s artists to create innovative pieces of work that at times radically revisited the conflict. The resulting work provoked powerful reflections on war and peace, engaging and reaching large audiences, many of whom might not normally have visited galleries or museums.

Some nations were conspicuous by the scale of their commemorative efforts; others were more selective and modest. Germany, for example, staged a single exhibition for six months at the Historical Museum in Berlin. 1914-1918. The First World War offered a multi-faceted display covering 1,000 square metres of what was described as the “ur-catastrophe”, the primal disaster of the 20th century, by focusing on its genesis and consequences within the global, and particularly the European, context. Critical reception of such shows was largely respectful, although it was also noted at the time that whereas many nations were developing comprehensive schemes to celebrate the centenary, others – such as Germany – preferred to acknowledge and then quietly forget.[2]

Perhaps more controversial were those national governments deemed to be seeking political advantage from the process of commemoration. Of the former British Empire and Commonwealth countries, Australia was said to have dedicated the most significant budget to remember its contribution to the Great War. One source reckoned that Australia had allocated as much as $552 million AUD, of which $470 million was from the taxpaying public purse. One of the major investments was the Sir John Monash Centre at Villers-Bretonneux on the Somme in France, which
was funded by $90 million AUD from the Defence budget and $10 million AUD from Veteran Affairs. It was to be the centrepiece of the country’s commitment to the memory of the war and Australia’s emergence as a modern nation-state. Critics of the "ANZAC centenary frenzy" questioned why a country of its size and scale should be committing an estimated $8,889 AUD for each Digger killed in the war, compared to $109 per British casualty and "a mere $2 for each dead German soldier." As crude as these arguments may seem, they help us appreciate the underlying tensions in the ways that the war was represented, staged and remembered. Exhibitions are rarely neutral displays of artefacts and objects; they are carefully curated and highly choreographed. On occasion, they can be susceptible to distortion and manipulation of evidence. In some parts of the world, what is chosen to be remembered and then represented to the public is an act of political will as much as it is an act of faith by a curator.

We might divide the hundreds of exhibitions and art-related events into three broad categories; 1) Historical retrospective exhibitions at a national scale. 2) Regional and thematic exhibitions of art and artefacts. 3) Public art, events and commissioned works by contemporary artists. Each of these notional "categories" will be examined briefly.

**Historical Retrospective Exhibitions on a National Scale**

As might be expected, those countries with the most extensive collections of their own World War 1 art and artefacts were able to stage the most comprehensive exhibitions during the commemorative period 2014 to 2018. Most of these were the same countries that had also made the greatest military commitment in terms of manpower and resources. But this was not always the case. American forces were committed to the Western Front for 8 months of the four-year war and yet the country staged numerous exhibitions during the commemorative period. Germany, by comparison, staged only a single exhibition at the national level and it was set firmly within the broader European context. The conceptual approach that underpinned these curatorial events tells us much about how the nation state understands and articulates its past, but also the level of public interest in the war.

Such "signature" or "keynote" exhibitions were invariably staged at the most eminent arts institution in a nation’s capital city. "The World War 1 Centennial" at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC, is a good example of one such signature event. Staged between April 2017 and November 2018, to coincide with the 100th anniversary of US involvement in the war, the Smithsonian dedicated all of its museums, libraries, and archives to war-related displays. These varied from exhaustive shows of stamp designs to sheet music, medals and medical exhibits, as well as the customary presentations of work by officially recruited war artists, the first ever scheme sponsored by the US government. Much of the artwork had never left storage, 500 pieces having been transferred to the Smithsonian from the War Department immediately after the war. For the first time since it was taken out of display in the 1920s, the Smithsonian (and an accompanying suite of high-resolution digitized images) made the entire collection available to the public.
Signature exhibitions staged in capital cities across the world were often complimented by a rich network of regional exhibitions. In the United States, for example, the New York Public Library in Manhattan staged "Over Here: WW1 and the Fight for the American Mind". In Boston, the Museum of Fine Arts held an exhibition of recruiting and savings posters from the war; the Printing Museum in Houston created "US and German Postcards from the Trenches", and in the deep south (vying perhaps for primary status as the nation’s true showcase) the National World War I Museum in Kansas City created "Over by Christmas". Others, such as the Paul Getty Centre in Los Angeles, took the higher ground by presenting a show with the title "War of Images, Images of War" which purported to "move[s] away from American introspection in favour of a more universal and long-term retrospective of the war."[6]

Australia and Canada have well-established war museums with substantial collections of art commissioned during and immediately after World War 1. Contemporary paintings, prints, posters and sculptures were presented as part of comprehensive historical displays during the commemorative period. These tended to focus on particular campaigns and battles that are now regarded as major milestones in the evolution of the modern nation: Vimy Ridge for the Canadians, Gallipoli for the Australians. New Zealand invested heavily in a memorial precinct for Wellington, complete with gardens and commemorative sculpture. The capital city also formed a close alliance with the film director Peter Jackson to create memorable displays that drew on his expertise in theatrical simulation.[7] In Europe, the French government committed significant resources to an expansive programme of exhibitions as part of the 1914-18 Mission Centenaire, including "To the east the endless war, 1918-1923" at the Army Museum in Paris, which explored the continuation of the fighting in the Middle East.[8] Equally varied were the suite of displays and events created by the Belgian authorities, many under the portfolio heading of 2014-18.brussels, and staged at Musée Royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire Militaire. War Heritage Institute, and BOZAR. Taking an expansive European view of the hostilities the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique (Royal Museums of the Fine Arts of Belgium) created "Berlin 1912-1932" which located the city’s arts in the broader political and urban context that spanned the war period. In Australia, while the National War Memorial in Canberra staged major exhibitions of contemporary war art, including the memorable canvas "The Menin Gate at Midnight" by Will Longstaff (1879-1953), and projections of their collections onto the building exterior, major metropolitan centres such as Melbourne devised city-wide gallery shows, events and retrospectives. Many were centred on the Shrine of Remembrance, which staged an ambitious, multi-arts "Aftermaths" installation across the Shrine Domain on 11 November 2018. Large crowds heard mass choirs singing commissioned works, white peace poppies were planted under MPavilion, and a huge wreath of inscribed enamel "Flowers of War" was unveiled in the undercroft galleries of the monumental edifice.[9]

Regional and Thematic Exhibitions

Many of the most stimulating exhibitions of historic and contemporary art in Europe were created at...
a regional level, most notably in the memorial towns of Peronne (Picardy) and Ieper (Oest Flanders), where the vast number of battlefield visitors and pilgrims congregated for key anniversaries. In Flanders Field Museum at Ieper (known during the war as Ypres) created a rolling programme of exhibitions that invariably sought to present the under-represented human aspects of the war, creating compelling narratives about refugees, colonial soldiers, wives and children. As with other centres of excellence, the museum devised an extensive educational program, attracting hundreds of academics into the town to participate in robust debate about the legacies of the war and its long aftermath, which resonate in today’s divided and fractious Europe. The museum also maintains an adventurous artist-in-residence scheme, which sets an international standard for cross-disciplinary site-based artwork embedded conceptually and figuratively in the militarised history of the region.[10]

Of other major Allied nations who fought in the war, there were regional and local displays of art and artefacts in Italy and Greece, many of which also resonated with political issues of the day. In Thessalonika, the city’s military museum and Museum of Byzantine Culture carried a comprehensive display of work drawn from and created during World War 1, including paintings, photographs and drawings by local representatives who fought against the German and Bulgarian forces. "Into the Vortex of the Great War" explored the Armee d'Orient through the eyes of foreign soldiers and refugees. Issues of land rights, national borders and the naming of countries was as potent a topic in the recent commemorative period as it had been a century earlier.[11]

Equally striking was the absence of a national signature exhibition remembering the war fought by Russia. This could be explained by the impact of the 1917 Revolution, which to some extent eclipsed the war, and the fact that Russian museums were instructed to remove art relating to the First World War as the Soviet authorities erased the war from public exposure and memory. However, there were many significant paintings, prints and sculptures produced during the pre-Communist era. Some of the work was presented in seminal exhibitions such as "A Bitter Truth" held in Berlin and London in 1994, but it was GRAD, a London-based gallery, working in collaboration with the Russian State Library, that staged a show of cross-media work, much of it seen for the first time in the West. 'A Game in Hell', held between 24 September and 30 November 2014, examined the artistic and historical significance of the war in pre- and post- Revolution Russia. This included Natalia Goncharova's woodcut portfolio "Mystical Images of War", hand-made Futurist books, as well as propaganda pieces such as lubki by Vladimir Mayakovskiy (1893-1930) and Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935). The exhibition proposed that the birth of Russia's artistic avant-garde was fundamentally influenced by the stylised aesthetics of popular prints and the naïve style of children’s drawings. In addition, the political polemic of propaganda posters was evident in such images as Lentulov’s 1914 lithograph, The Austrians Surrendered Lvov to the Russians like Rabbits Defeated by Lions.

Many of the most original and innovative exhibitions of war-related work were created at the local and regional levels. In Scotland, for example, the city of Glasgow staged a cycle of exhibitions under the rubric "Brushes with War", which included the work of Scottish artists who recorded the front-line and home life, as well as prints by Anglo-Welsh lithographer and painter Frank Brangwyn (1867-
Regional agendas and local voices were invoked in countries across the globe, from the Military Museums Network of Alberta in Canada, to the English West County where the Bristol Cultural Development Partnership nurtured a programme of historical displays, conferences, reading events, as well as the commissioning of new art, ceramics, architectural models, and original scores for silver bands and choirs.\(^{[12]}\) Many metropolitan events, such as those in Bristol, could boast audiences that matched those of their capital cities. In geographically dispersed countries such as Australia, the role of the regional display was even more impactful. The several war-related shows and events in Queensland, for example, included exhibitions of works at Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery relating to Frank Hurley’s (1885-1962) front-line photographs from 1917-18, and – in Brisbane – displays of dioramas, exhibits of tapestries and *children’s books*, projections onto historic buildings, and a miscellany of cultural and musical events that spoke directly to the regional audience and their forebears.\(^{[13]}\)

In the United Kingdom, the national and regional galleries of modern and contemporary art swung into action early in the commemorative cycle. Arguably setting an international standard for the variety of signature exhibitions, regional initiatives, and crowd-sourced cultural events, *14-18 Now* was framed as a nationwide scheme under the slogan “Extraordinary arts experiences connecting people with the First World War”. This rich programme was inaugurated by a major exhibition of art at the Imperial War Museum in London, which drew extensively on its impressive stock of fine art, arguably the second finest collection of British painting, print and sculpture from the early Modernist period. "Truth and Memory" was billed as the largest retrospective of British art from the First World War in almost a century and included the work of the renowned young Modernist soldier-artists from the war - Paul Nash, Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), William Roberts (1895-1980), Stanley Spencer – as well as a number of more established painters whose reputations barely survived the conflict. Most public museums in London, like those in most major cities in Britain, created retrospective exhibitions of art from the period. As in France, the range was extensive and inclusive, from the exhibition "For King and Country?" at the Jewish Museum to the displays of designs, posters and pressed flowers at the Garden Museum on the south bank of the Thames. Further north, the metropolitan centres of Manchester, Newcastle, and the Royal Armouries in Leeds staged major displays of original artwork, while the museums of Liverpool (the Biennial, Tate and Merseyside Maritime) collaborated on a dazzling show of ships and camouflage. Creative regionalism yielded a rich menu of exhibitions, for example "Trent to Trenches", in Nottingham, which featured paintings, drawings, photographs, maps, trench art and period objects as touchstones for investigations and connection to local family histories. In the south, on a smaller scale, the Willis Museum explored the creative output of the "Artists Rifles" from the Pre-Raphaelites to the Battle of Passchendaele. Mixing historic artwork with current creative practices, the curators of "The Sensory War 1914-2014", in Manchester, devised an exhibition around pain and rehabilitation, which included Sophie Jodoin’s haunting drawings of faces morphing with gas masks to depict a distorted human physiognomy. Curators Ana Carden-Coyne, David Morris and Tim Wilcox selected memorable sculpture, print and multimedia, including "The Separation Line", an eleven-minute film-montage of the aftermath of war in
Afghanistan witnessed through military repatriation funeral processions in Royal Wootton Bassett.[14]

By contrast with this emphasis on local histories, affiliations and genealogy, a signature exhibition at the Tate Gallery, London, was held in 2018 to close the commemorative period. “The Aftermath of War” drew on a spectrum of European art to trace how artists reacted to the memory of the war and to its personal and professional impact in the post-war years. The exhibition displayed leading work by former combatants such as George Grosz (1893-1959) and Otto Dix (1891-1969) – who cruelly exposed the unequal treatment of disabled veterans in post-war Germany - and Fernand Leger (1881-1955) and C.R.W. Nevinson who envisioned the city of the future as society began to rebuild itself and its urban spaces. The epic at the Tate did what local and regional shows could not easily do: to locate the impact of war within the contemporary global context of trade disputes, shifting populations, and identity politics. Whether it was fully global in its representation is questionable: the dominance of European white artists was noticeable.

However, the scale of public engagement in Europe was significant. In France and the United Kingdom, cultural events ignited energy and enthusiasm from a wide range of society, many of whom might not have not regarded the gallery or museum as a natural arena for their interests. In the UK, the 14-18 Now projects induced thousands of people to "write" to the statue of an unknown soldier on Paddington Railway Station, hundreds to help repaint a ship moored on the River Thames, and tens of thousands to participate in nationwide moments of remembrance. In late 2018, as the five-year programme of cultural events in the UK drew to a close, it was estimated that 35 million people had engaged with the exhibitions, events, installations and public art.[15]

Public Artworks, Site Specific and Specially Commissioned Art Works

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the commemorative period was the diversity of productions, curations and commissions by current artists. Achieved through both public and private funding, through crowd funding and fellowships, a diverse population of painters, sculptors, media practitioners and printmakers in Belgium, UK, France, Australia and elsewhere produced many of the most striking icons of memory. The art installation "Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red" at the Tower of London required some 890,000 ceramic poppies to be sculpted, fired and installed by artists and public volunteers.[16] Across the English Channel, in Belgium in October 2014, 8,750 torch-bearers lined the old front line from Nieuwpoort to Ploegsteert as it existed in November 1914.[17] Three years later, sculptor Koen Vanmechelen located 600,000 individually fired clay sculptures along a tract of the former front line a few miles from Ypres at a notorious tract of the old front line, known as "The Bluff" or Die Grosse Bastion.[18]

The very transience of these art events seemed to add to their popular appeal. They became a distinctive feature of the memorial landscape. Because most were time-based and site-specific, there was a strong overlap with film and theatre. This was most notable in the work of New Zealand
film director Peter Jackson, whose extraordinary exhibition and installations of oversized models of Kiwi soldiers and nurses at Te Papa, Wellington, attracted global media attention. In scale and reach, his work is redolent of the panoramas and theatrical spectacles that attracted huge crowds, and many soldiers on leave, during the Great War itself. Another Oscar-winning film director, Danny Boyle, choreographed a nationwide commemorative event on beaches across Britain. The public were asked to join together to create huge silhouettes in the sand of people who died in the war. Images were available from the national ‘Lives of the War’ project, which aimed to tell the stories of eight million people from across the British Empire who served in the war. Such nationwide temporal events proved hugely popular with people of all backgrounds; gaining extensive news coverage and reaching out in way that more conventional displays of a historical past – battlefield tours, unveiling of memorials, re-enactment events – could not do.

Commemoration offered opportunities not only to remember and revisit art work from the period, but to create highly memorable and moving works of new art. In mid-2016, Turner-prize winner Jeremy Deller devised a human memorial, "We’re Here Because We’re Here", by spreading 1,500 silent soldiers for a single day across British cities and towns. In France, the centenary gave artists such as the photographer Gerard Rondeau a platform to exhibit twenty years of journeying between Sarajevo and Reims, blending personal stories, witness accounts and a ravaged countryside to describe the tracks and paths of war. South African artist and polymath William Kentridge created an epic artwork "The Head and the Load" in 2018 to tell the neglected story of the millions of African porters and carriers who served British, French and German forces during the war. In Australia, the Federal Government commissioned two Victorian artists who had been official war artists in Afghanistan and Iraq. Charles Green and Lyndell Brown created a large tapestry for the Sir John Monash Centre on the Somme. "Morning Star" depicts a winter dawn light illuminating a path through the Australian eucalyptus bush. The composition is inset with portraits of soldiers and fragments showing embarkment and arrival. Like so many remarkable artworks commissioned during the commemorative period, the artists wanted to stress the historical and its resonance in the present: “The tapestry emphasizes the disjunction between the terrible experiences that the museum describes rather than repeats them. It seems to us very important to present images such as those soldiers might have carried in their hearts and imaginations as they arrived at the Western Front.”

Conclusion

As part of the wider commemoration of the conflict, the period between 2014 and 2018 was marked globally by major exhibitions and displays of original artworks that had been commissioned and created during and immediately after World War 1. While several nations staged singular and significant historic exhibitions, others – in the USA, UK and Australia – produced multiple museum events and gallery displays, many of an extremely high curatorial standard. The UK, France and Belgium, in particular, also created comprehensive cultural programs funded at a national level. Globally, curators and their teams designed new permanent exhibits, and brought together innovative
collections of artefacts, ideas and artworks to create new insights into the nature of the war and its social, economic and cultural impact. Perhaps the most impressive legacy of the period of commemoration was the opportunity it afforded current artists, filmmakers, photographers and others from across the creative sector to produce new and highly original pieces of work that stimulated wide public interest and participation. State-funded initiatives in Europe, especially in France, Belgium and the UK, created a significant number of opportunities for contemporary artists to reflect on the centenary through the creation of events, artefacts, installations and exhibitions. The very best of these (and there were many that deserve that accolade) combined imaginative forms of creative expression, a measured respect for the past, and a genuine wish to engage with the widest possible audience. As a result, in many countries the depth of public engagement during the commemorative period reached levels of awareness and participation that could barely have been predicted by the artists, curators and creators who planned them with such imagination and attention to detail.

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Notes


10. † The artist-in-residence schemes at In Flanders Field Museum in Ieper have included Kingsley Baird (New Zealand sculptor), Mark Anstee (UK performance artist), numerous European practitioners, and interns from Australia.

11. † Into the Vortex of the Great War, Biennale 6, Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki, 14 December 2017 to 30 September 2018.


14. † The Sensory War was presented in partnership with Whitworth Art Gallery and the Centre for the Cultural History of War at the University of Manchester. The film "The Separation Line" was created by artist Kate Davies.

15. † 14-18 Now was a five-year program of cultural events related to the First World War, funded by the UK Arts Council, Heritage Lottery Fund and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport. See 14-18 Now. WW1 Centenary Art Commissions, issued by 14-18 Now. WW1 Centenary Art Commissions, online: https://www.1418now.org.uk/ (retrieved: 31 May 2019).

16. † Designed by Paul Cummins and Tom Piper, the artwork was first created in the moat of the Tower of London, England, between July and November 2014. Further shows of the work toured the UK until 2018, and were staged at St Magnus Cathedral in Orkney, the Black Watch Museum in Perth, Scotland, Ulster Museum, Caernarfon Castle, Wales, and other locations.

17. † "The Light Front, 2014", staged on 17 October 2014, from Nieuwpoort to Ploegsteert, Ypres.

18. † Vanmechelen, Koen: ComingWorldRememberMe (CWRM), Palingbeek, Ypres, 30 March – 11 November 2018.

19. † Rondeau’s photographic sojourns along the chemins de guerre in Europe were first undertaken with the novelist Yves Gibeau, author of "Allons z’enfants".

20. † Kentridge, William: The Head and the Load, Tate Modern London, 11 to 15 July 2018. The work was co-commissioned with New York’s Park Avenue Armory and Ruhrtriennale, with additional support from the Holland Festival.


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