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Nash, Paul

By [Paul Gough](#)

Nash, *Paul*

War artist

Born 11 May 1889 in London, Great Britain

Died 11 July 1946 in Bournemouth, Great Britain

Paul Nash was a British painter who served as an infantry officer and an official war artist during the First World War. His paintings and prints depicted the dystopian face of modern warfare etched on the tortured landscapes of the Western Front. His front line work was critically acclaimed and exhibited widely during and after the war, transforming him from an artist of limited ambition to one of the greatest British painters of the 20th century.

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Early Career

Paul Nash (1889-1946) studied at the Slade [school of art](#) in London. In the years immediately before the First World War, his artistic preferences were for neo-Romantic nocturnes and visionary landscapes that were indebted to the mystical figuration of [Dante Gabriel Rossetti \(1828-1882\)](#) and the Pre-Raphaelites. Although he was aware of the new Modernist movements such as English Vorticism and [Italian Futurism](#), it did not impact on his work until his exposure to combat on the

War Artist

Nash volunteered for service in his county military unit, the Hampshire regiment. In mid-1917, after two years of home service, he was posted as a subaltern to the St. Eloi sector of the Ypres salient. After two months at the front, he was invalided home after falling into a trench. Convalescing with a broken rib, he learned that many of his fellow officers had been killed in an attack on the enemy redoubt at Hill 60.

Recovering in England, his work took the first of several radical creative turns. Embracing the diagonal dynamism and jagged energy of his Vorticist contemporaries, he abandoned his pastoral visions, replacing them with splintered woods, [violated nature](#), and wasted panoramas. The actualities of the war came as a terrific shock to an artist so deeply imbued with the English pastoral ideal.

An evocative writer as well as an innovative painter, Nash recalled in one letter marching to the front line through the remnants of a recently-shelled wood, when it was little more than “a place with an evil name, pitted and pocked with shells, the trees torn to shreds, often reeking with poison gas.”^[1] A few days later, to his astonishment, this desolate and ruinous place was drastically changed. As Nash wrote in his war letters in *Outline*, it was now a vivid green, bristling with buds and fresh leaf growth:

The most broken trees even had sprouted somewhere and in the midst, from the depth of the wood's bruised heart poured out the throbbing song of a nightingale. Ridiculous mad incongruity! One can't think which is the more absurd, the War or Nature...^[2]

Such visions were translated into a suite of watercolours and coloured drawings. Exhibitions of his work brought him to the attention of critics who recognized his novel rendition of modern war. It heralded, one wrote, “an actuality, an immediacy, that brought to life everything about the front which people had read and heard, but had found themselves quite unable to visualize.”^[3]

Nash was commissioned as an official war artist by the [British government's War Propaganda Bureau](#) (later the ministry of information) and sent back to the Western Front. Arriving back in the Ypres salient in November 1917, he was spellbound and aghast at the scale of the devastation, particularly the sight of splintered corpses and dismembered trees, seeing in their shattered limbs an equivalent to the human carnage that lay all around or even hung in shreds from the eviscerated branches. Accompanied by his batman and chauffeur, Nash travelled behind the front lines and often came under fire, but he was able to produce a collection of powerful drawings and watercolours that captured the dystopian face of modern warfare. In these works, Nash let the devastated landscape express the abominations of the conflict. It was a phantasmagoric world, craters brimming with sulphurous liquid; trees inert and gaunt, failing to respond to the shafts of sunlight; their branches

dangling lifelessly like melancholy tresses of hair.

Critical reception was unanimous, applauding a brave new talent. Writing in the foreword to the *Void of War* exhibition in London in May 1918, [Arnold Bennett \(1867-1931\)](#), the writer and director of [propaganda](#) in [France](#), wrote:

Lieutenant Nash has seen the Front simply and largely. He has found the essentials of it – that is to say, disfigurement, danger, desolation, ruin, chaos – the little figures of men creeping devotedly and tragically over the waste. The convention he uses is ruthlessly selective. The wave-like formations of shell-holes, the curve of shell-bursts, the straight lines and sharply defined angles of wooden causeways, decapitated trees, the fangs of obdurate masonry, the weight of heavy skies, the human pawns of battle.^[4]

Powerful exhibitions of his front line work were staged in London; oil paintings were commissioned for both British and Canadian war memorial schemes. Large oil paintings such as “The Menin Road”, “Void of War”, and “The Mule Track” revealed him to be a major new talent on the European stage. Nash had created a distinctive vision of war, fuelled by an intense anger at the madness of the conflict and its violation of nature.

Post-War Career

Nash struggled to find a distinctive voice after the armistice. Describing himself as “a war artist without a war”, he tried to maintain his creative focus. Having developed a new syntax of violent despoliation amidst the vast shapelessness of modern industrialised conflict, he found it difficult to orientate his practice in peacetime. Yet, by fusing continental surrealism with the English Arcadian tradition, he emerged from the 1920s as a highly innovative painter, photographer, and printmaker. His reputation was enhanced considerably by numerous one-man exhibitions and monographs written by leading art historians of the day. He was one of very few official war artists from the Great War who was again commissioned in the Second World War. He died in 1946, aged 57, from heart failure aggravated by an asthmatic condition that may have had its origins in the gas-reeking trenches of the Ypres salient.

Paul Gough, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University

Section Editor: [Jennifer Wellington](#)

Notes

1. ↑ Paul Nash to Margaret Nash, in Nash, Paul: Outline. An Autobiography and Other Writings, London 1949, p. 186.

2. ↑ Ibid.
3. ↑ Quoted in Eates, Margot: Paul Nash. The Master of the Image, 1889-1946, London 1973, p. 22.
4. ↑ Bennett, Arnold: Void of War. An Exhibition of Pictures, London 1918.

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