

# War Pictures by British Artists

*Part of Great Britain's National  
Collection Now on View in America*

By CHRISTIAN BRINTON



"Renaissance," by George Clausen, R. A., depicts the spirit of new Belgium arising anew from the slaughter and ruin of the old

**W**HILE it is a matter of interest that Michelangelo reconstructed the defenses of Florence and filled the post of General and Inspector of Fortifications, and Leonardo designed engines of destruction, and was a pioneer in the province of aeronautics, their contribution to the cause of war was made as men of creative genius and not, primarily, in the capacity of artists. It has remained for the present generation of militarists to utilize the artist, as such; and one of the significant points brought out by the current struggle is the fact that artists and artistic principles are capable of playing a vital part in the conduct of war. We have discovered during these latter days that, in order to wage war in all its refinement and nuances, it is necessary to go to school to nature, to co-



"Two R. F. C.'s having breakfast," (Royal Flying Corps Officers) by Major Sir William Orpen, A. R. A., R. H. A. just wounded,



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operate with nature, and to invoke the aid of certain elements, chromatic, plastic, and rhythmic which are among nature's most distinctive and inspiring attributes.

While there is scarcely a nation represented in the great conflict of nations that did not in some manner employ the fundamentals of color concealment and protective mimicry, it must not be assumed that this is the only artistic innovation directly traceable to the war. The most significant departure would, however, seem to lie not in the adaptation of artists and art formulae to the rigorous exigencies of war, but in the recognition accorded the artist as the true historian, the veritable interpreter, of war in all its visible aspects.



"Flanders from the clouds," as it looks to a cubist artist in an airplane,—by Nevinson



"Bacteria," by James McBey, is a study of British doctors in a laboratory in Palestine making tests to help fight enemies as subtle and deadly and almost as loathsome as the Huns



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**WE** have long admired France for her unflinching ability to correlate art and life, whether in time of peace or amid the stress and strain of battle, but among Anglo-Saxon countries at least, England has been the first to enlist the services of the artist, and the readiest to grant him that measure of official standing so manifestly his due.

The immediate vogue and utility of the British recruiting posters, designed by such master draughtsmen as Mr. Frank Brangwyn and Mr. G. Spencer Pryse, afforded concrete proof to the Government of the value of art as a means of furthering the cause of war. In due course a number of men of the highest professional position, including Sir John Lavery, Sir William Orpen, Mr. George Clausen, Mr. Muirhead Bone, Mr. James McBey, Mr. Augustus John, and others were commissioned to devote their time and talents to war themes. Those physically fit went to the Front, while those unable to withstand the rigors of active service remained at home to chronicle the not less essential story of Britain's industrial, naval, or agricultural achievements. One and all, they worked with zest and spirit, and press and public responded gallantly to their efforts.

The series of exhibitions devoted to war subjects seen from time to time in the leading London galleries drew



"The Captive," a study of a boche prisoner in Flanders, painted by Colin W. Gill



"The Field of Passchendaele," by Paul Nash



"Discharging flour at the Port of London," by John Everett



"A London Drawing-room, — wartime," by Sir John Lavery, A. R. A., shows the interior of a great West End mansion converted to military hospital use



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unprecedented crowds, while a substantial number of paintings and drawings have been purchased by the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, the Committee of the Canadian War Memorials Fund, and such enlightened organizations as the Contemporary Art Society.

It was inevitable that Great Britain should in this, as in any similar circumstance, recognize the accepted leaders of contemporary art. One might readily have predicted that R. A's. and A. R. A's. would be assured of generous representation. That the list of official British war artists should, however, include the names of various painters of manifestly advanced persuasion—Cubists, Futurists, Vorticists, and the like,—will come as something of a surprise to the Transatlantic public.

**SUCH**, in brief outline, is the inception and general scope of the collection of war paintings and drawings by British artists which the Ministry of Information has sent to America. / A direct product of war and war conditions, it reflects not only the varied aspects and incidents of the great struggle, but also the actual state of British artistic taste at the present moment. / You will not (*Continued on page 70*)

indeed find British art materially altered by over four years of incessant fighting. To fresh scene and subject has been added a direct, forceful accent, in keeping with the temper of the time. There is, moreover, an emotional and imaginative appeal to much of this work not ordinarily associated with official art.

**THE** hundred-odd canvases by Major Sir William Orpen which constitute the largest individual contribution to the present exhibition reveal the artist in a welcome diversity of moods and media. You note here but few echoes of the clever, somewhat over-conscious portraitist or the painter of diverting studio interiors: The two years Sir William spent on the Western Front with his headquarters mainly in the quaint, steep-gabled little town of Cassel, have witnessed a decided increase in his artistic stature. His manner of confronting reality is more direct, and its transcription more salient than ever before.

Sir William Orpen's ability to fix upon canvas, within the space of two or three hours, the personality of a sitter is matched by that of few living artists. And even less time is required in which to seize the pictorial essentials of a given subject, whether it be a pair of



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Boches or an animated street scene. Color and character are the special features of Sir William's contribution. As an Irishman it is impossible for him to suppress that element of humorous, searching commentary which is the birthright of his race.

Individual as are his studies of the figure, and fine as are the portraits of generals, staff officers, and sturdy privates, it is in his likenesses of the aviators that Sir William strikes his deepest note. You see in them something more than the mere individual. You get a sense of type, a type new to art, in these young heroes who, with forceful fixity of eye and mind, have left earth to chance fresh glory amid the clouds.

If Sir William Orpen is the most prolific of British painters of the Great War, Mr. Muirhead Bone is the most indefatigable and fecund among its draughtsmen. Widely known through reproduction, Mr. Bone's drawings form the most comprehensive graphic record of scenes on the Western Front, at home among the munition workers, or afloat with the Grand Fleet. In the current exhibition are a number of hitherto unpublished subjects, several heightened with wash, others in colored chalk, that cannot fail to enhance the artist's reputation. No one possesses such rich fidelity of line; no one displays a like fertility of theme and treatment. Yet Mr. Bone seldom fails to give us a fresh point of view, or to endow his work with a certain emotional appeal that adds not a little to these glimpses of ruined town, wasted countryside, or lowering battleship.

Equally distinctive, and occupying a position of kindred importance both numerically and artistically, is the series of water-color drawings of the Egyptian and Palestine expeditions by Mr. James McBey. A comparative newcomer, Mr. McBey's preliminary training, which included a sojourn in Morocco, admirably fitted him for the portrayal of the activities of the British forces in the Near East. An accurate eye for aerial perspective, and a subtle perception of atmospheric values, have enabled the artist to give us in swift, delicate washes and sensitive line, characteristic impressions of this most picturesque of all campaigns of the Great War.

**R**EPLATE with observation and the spirited rendering of external appearance as is the production of the foregoing men, there is yet another and quite different attitude to be taken toward war as seen from the point of view of the artist. The work of Sir John Lavery, Sir William Orpen, Mr. Muirhead Bone, Mr. McBey, Mr. Clausen, Mr. John Everett, and, in somewhat



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lesser degree, of such individualist as Mr. Brangwyn, Mr. Augustus John, and Mr. Kennington, is objective in aim and appeal. While in each case possessing the stamp of a definitely fixed artistic personality, their contribution may broadly be termed a record of fact rather than an expression of feeling. There are, following the illuminating distinction of Blake, two ways of looking at the visible universe—the one with the eye, the other *through* the eye. We have considered at some length the work of various British artists who practise the former method. We shall here with confront the achievement of certain younger and less solidified talents who have adopted the latter.

**T**HE new art, which can only rightly be described as Expressionism, has made many converts in England, foremost among whom may be named Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson. Passing with that rapid power of absorption which is the precious prerogative of youth through the preliminary stages of Impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism, Mr. Nevinson finally arrived at an individual stage of aesthetic self-determination. This ardent apostle of modernism to-day ranks as one of the few typical artistic exponents of war. While certain others may be said without invidiousness to illustrate war, Mr. Nevinson has succeeded in interpreting war. The distinction applies with pertinence to Mr. Nevinson, for he has seen war not alone with, but through, the eye.

In his capacity of motor ambulance driver and mechanic, of hospital orderly and official artist at the Front, Mr. Nevinson became acquainted with war in all its phases. He has studied not only war itself but the reaction of war upon the collective consciousness. His method is synthetic and creative, not literal and objective. The very spirit and essence of modern war in all its austere anonymity and mechanistic might has entered into his work, transforming mere fact into an eloquent symbol of destructive energy.

It would have been frankly impossible to depict modern war as Mr. Nevinson conceives it without having recourse to the fundamental principles of modern art as formulated by Cubist and Futurist. Attention may be called in particular to his free employment of repeated angles and overlapping planes, to the suggestion of suddenly released force lines in his remarkable apparition of a bursting shell, and to his use of alternating rhythm in the swinging gait of troops on the march. Convincing and suggestive as are these and similar subjects, it is nevertheless when he ascends into the newly won domain of the sky that Mr. Nevinson achieves his finest



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effects. Here, amid swiftly stabbing searchlight and silently bursting "Archie" he becomes a true poet in a kingdom ever abstract and inspiring.

If Mr. Nevinson in his paintings, etchings, and lithographs has conquered for us the sky, it has remained for Mr. Paul Nash to reveal, as it were, the innermost torments of the earth. Mr. Nash has also seen active service. At the outbreak of the war he joined the Artists' Rifles, was later a Mapping Instructor, and was afterward commissioned in the Hampshires. If his work creates an unreal, fantastic impression, it is obviously not because he is in any sense unfamiliar with his material.

The seemingly crude, almost achromatic canvases of Mr. Paul Nash depict what may perhaps be described as nature's dance of (*Continued on page 72*)



"Signallers," by the Vorticist, William P. Roberts, has the spirit of humor as well as that of modernism

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