“I have just returned, last night, from a visit to Brigade Headquarters up the line and I shall not forget it as long as I live. I have seen the most frightful nightmare of a country more conceived by Dante or Poe than by nature.... It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless.”

—Paul Nash to his wife Margaret, 23 November 1917—

All works from the collection of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, unless otherwise noted.


Figure 1: Paul Nash, Rain, Lake Zilleleke, lithograph on paper, 1918. Gift of Simon and Caroline Davis, 2018 (61-002.01). Photo: Bernard Clark.

Figure 2: Passchendaele Mud, photograph, 1917. Canadian War Museum, Ottawa. George Metcalf Archival Collection (CWM 19930013-511).

Figure 3: Muirhead Bone, Piccadilly Circus, 1915, drypoint and etching on paper. Gift of Simon and Caroline Davis, 2017 (60-014.01). Photo: Bernard Clark.

Figure 4: Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, Survivors at Arras, 1917, drypoint on paper. Gift of Simon and Caroline Davis, 2017 (60-014.02). Photo: Bernard Clark.

Figure 5: Percy John Delf Smith, Whither? Whence? A Duck-Walk in France, 1918, drypoint on paper. Gift of Caroline and Simon Davis, 2017 (60-014.06). Photo: Bernard Clark.

Published in conjunction with the exhibition Printmakers at War, 1914–1918, presented at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 25 August to 2 December 2018.

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I have just returned, last night, from a visit to Brigade Headquarters up the line, and I shall not forget it as long as I live. I have seen the most frightful nightmare of a country more conceived by Dante or Poe than by nature... it is unspeakable, godless, hopeless.

—Paul Nash to his wife Margaret, 13 November 1917
the cavalry and cities formed an especially moving subset of imagery created at the front. Fiume, meanwhile, was fundamentally historical to the concept of war, for only with the advance and retreat across land-as-territory does war take place. Artistic portraits of those sites of engagement thereby chronicle the war’s progression in the most basic of terms. Similarly, the utterly ravaged sites of engagement made landscape an especially expressive genre for artists. Cities and the countryside, destroyed in horrifying ways through new technologies, offered gripping potential to communicate the horrors of war. Finally, through the manipulation of the visual principle of perspective, the observer could be tacitly invoked in ways that called to mind the conditions of individual experience. For artists and viewers alike, this aspect of landscape provided a needed corrective to the shockingly mechanized and dehumanizing element of this conflict. Nash concludes his 1917 letter to his wife with a pledge: “I am no longer an artist interested and curious, I am a messenger who will bear back word from men who were fighting to those who want to learn what was going on for ever. Feeble, inarticulate, will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls.”

In his work, Nash has been praised for creating a new “calligraphy of war” in the prints he created as a war artist. In his work [Fig. 3], he redrew the visual language of the war in one that emphasizes the empty, the loneliness and the barbarism of destruction across the natural scene. This lithograph demonstrates with remarkable gravity the scale of the German devastation of the Belgian landscape. The rain, at once a marker of the regions distinctive weather but also a dramatic visual motif, animates the setting. The intersecting diagonals of the downpour fracture the immense sky into what appear to be thousands of pieces, conveying the artist’s sense of hopelessness. The landscape here becomes an eternally scoured environment, created through the conventional means of recession plans and contrasts of lights and darks, devoid of traditional military grandeur. In spite of not holding the official title of war artist, he assumed the charge of depicting war’s most personal commentary as a sign of authentic experience. Tellingly, the first official war artist was commissioned by the British government in 1916, after it was recognized that the foreign wartime landscape possessed a potent and accommodating vehicle for communicating the hopelessness of war. Others cited the need for a violent razing of the visual language employed by artists in favor of a new paradigm that more clearly echoed the pace, verge, and responsibilities of modern life. The sculptor William Robert Colden (1872–1948), for example, lamented the “wound of destroyed doge-try” that had permeated the visual and performing arts in the years of the twentieth century and paved for its excision in the name of continued progress. Many were overwhelmed by a keen sense of patriotism; Nash, like many of his British peers, felt the call to serve shortly after the declaration of war in August 1914. Artists typically joined the 54-year-old Artists’ Rifles, a regiment of the British army known officially as the 38 (Artists’) Rifle Volunteer Corps. A volunteer unit that trained soldiers in all aspects of infantry life and prepared them for service abroad, the Artists’ Rifles offered a sense of unity and camaraderie among artists who had pledged to serve. In short, the beginning of the Great War seemed to offer opportunities for life-enriching experiences and professional growth.

As the magnitude of the carnage increased—particularly with the Battle of the Somme (July–November 1916) and its one million casualties among all combatants—those on the battlefield felt compelled to document the horrors of modern warfare. Views of the battlefield felt forced to document the horrors of modern warfare. Views of the countryside and cities formed an especially moving subset of imagery created at the front. Fiume, meanwhile, was fundamentally historical to the concept of war, for only with the advance and retreat across land-as-territory does war take place. Artistic portraits of those sites of engagement thereby chronicle the war’s progression in the most basic of terms. Similarly, the utterly ravaged sites of engagement made landscape an especially expressive genre for artists. Cities and the countryside, destroyed in horrifying ways through new technologies, offered gripping potential to communicate the horrors of war. Finally, through the manipulation of the visual principle of perspective, the observer could be tacitly invoked in ways that called to mind the conditions of individual experience. For artists and viewers alike, this aspect of landscape provided a needed corrective to the shockingly mechanized and dehumanizing element of this conflict. Nash concludes his 1917 letter to his wife with a pledge: “I am no longer an artist interested and curious, I am a messenger who will bear back word from men who were fighting to those who want to learn what was going on for ever. Feeble, inarticulate, will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls.”

In his charge, and that of Nevins and Linton, was to make those on the home front grasp the magnitude of the ruin of cities and landscapes, as well as of men’s spirits. The artists who served in the war and shared their experiences through the mediums of landscape captured the distinctly modern aspects of the Great War through a certain-order-gone. Their images serve as warnings for future generations and poignant markers of their lived experiences.

Jacquelyn N. Coutré, Bader Curator and Researcher of European Art


the battlefield felt compelled to document the horrors of modern warfare. Views of the experiences and professional growth.

of infantry life and prepared them for service abroad, the Artists' Rifles offered a potent and accommodating vehicle for communicating the hopelessness of war.

Such sentiments had their origins in an explicit enthusiasm at the beginning of the war, if one is going to fight. Many members of the younger generation of British artists clamoured with

excision in the name of continued progress.

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cosmopolitan London life against the backdrop of dimmed lampposts and searchlights, the subtle indications of the wartime situation. In spite of the detail and richness of the representation of those activities, however, underscores the transformation of the land from a military
corollary to the official statements. The artist translated his personal experience into a personal commentary as a sign of authentic experience. Tellingly, the first official war artist,

of profound loss. Without the slightest hint of human presence but constructed distinctly as a war artist.

returned to the front as a war artist in July 1917, sought to capture the routine, destructive

by artists in favour of a new paradigm that more readily echoed the pace, rigours and responsibilities of modern life. The sculptor William Robert Collier (1872–1947), for example, lamented the “waste of doomed decadence” that had permeated the visual

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Many were overwhelmed by a keen sense of patriotism; Nash, like many of his artist peers, felt the call to serve shortly after the declaration of war in August 1914. Artists typically joined the 54-year-old

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Paul Nash (1889–1946) conveys the decimated state of the countryside near the annihilated

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The concept of making the ‘soldiers’ the subjects of art was playing a role in the history of the military, as the idea of soldiers as the ‘victors’ of war had been transformed into soldiers as the ‘victims’ of war. Artists like Paul Nash and Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson were among the first to use the medium of art to record and interpret the realities of war.

In spite of not holding the official title of war artist, he assumed the charge of depicting the battlefield. Percy John Delf Smith (1882–1948) served as a gunner on the Western Front in 1914, and he later undertook a series of prints based on his private sketches of the battlefield.

In fact, one legend has it that the lake at the centre of the scene was a destination for British soldiers when enemy fire grew too overwhelming. Lake Zillebeke may thus have become a sanctuary for men in the Ypres salient, while Nash depicted it as a symbol to individual salvation.

the landscape here intersecting diagonals of the downpour fracture the immense sky into what appear to be thousands of pieces, conveying the artist's sense of hopelessness. The landscape here is a stark contrast to the official wartime landscapes, which were characterized by a lack of human presence and constructed as an image of victory. Nash's painting, however, is a poignant reminder of the human cost of war and the devastating impact of modern warfare.

"I am no longer an artist interested and curious, I am a messenger who will bring back word from men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever. Feeble, inarticulate, will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may it burn their lazy souls."
The battlefield felt compelled to document the horrors of modern warfare. Views of (July–November 1916) and its one million casualties among all combatants—those on As the magnitude of the carnage increased—particularly with the Battle of the Somme (Artists’) Rifle Volunteer Corps. A volunteer unit that trained soldiers in all aspects Artists typically joined the 54-year-old sense of patriotism; Nash, like many of his artist peers, felt the call to serve shortly after the declaration of war in August 1914. Artists generally joined the 54-year-old Artists Rifles, a regiment of the British army known officially as the 38 middle of the war, if one is going” Such sentiments had their origins in an explicit enthusiasm at the beginning of the war. Artistic work of this kind was significant in that it served as a potent and accommodating vehicle for communicating the hopelessness of war. Such artistry and criticism were intended to reassure the public that the war was winnable. In fact, one legend has it that the lake at the centre of the scene was a destination for British soldiers when enemy fire grew too overwhelming. Lake Zillebeke may thus have become a sanctuary for men in the Ypres Salient, while Nash depicted it as a symbol of individual salvation.

Percy John Duff Smith (1881–1946) served as a ‘war artist’ on the Western Front in 1914, and he later undertook a series of prints based on his private sketches of the battlefield. In spite of not holding the official title of war artist, he assumed the charge of depicting the catastrophe of war. Foremost, landscape was fundamental historically to the concept of war, for its specificity and recognizability as an arena of activity, a theatre of operations. The landscape would provide a means for artists to express their own feelings about the war and its implications. The landscape here becomes an eternally scorched environment, created through the conventional means of beaching, or killing, the forces of nature. The landscape here serves as a eulogy to individual salvation. The landscape here also serves as a reminder of the futility of war and the futility of the human spirit in the face of it. The landscape here is a call to arms, a call to action, a call to remember. The landscape here is a reminder of the human condition and the human experience.

In short, the landscape and the urban scenes conformed to an essentially moving subject of imagery created at the front. Foremost, landscape was fundamentally important to the concept of war, for only with the advance and retreat across land and territory does war take place. Artistic portrayals of those sites of engagement thereby continue the war’s progression in the most basic of terms. Similarly, the utterly ravaged sites of engagement made landscape an essential space for expressing the experience of war. Cities and the countryside, destroyed in horrifying ways through new technologies, offered gripping potential to communicate the horrors of war. Finally, through the manipulation of the visual principle of perspective, the observer could be tacitly invited in ways that called to mind the conditions of individual experience. For artists and viewers alike, this aspect of landscape provided a needed corrective to the shockingly diminished and dehumanized element of this context. Photography (Fig. 2) was a first step in capturing the still ruins, wasted forests and lacerated earth of the French and Belgian battlefields, but those back in Britain craved a document of their war, and Nash’s photographs served as a reminder of the devastation caused by the war. The landscape here serves as a reminder of the futility of war and the futility of the human spirit in the face of it. The landscape here is a call to arms, a call to action, a call to remember. The landscape here is a reminder of the human condition and the human experience.

In spite of the detail and richness of the scene, an emotional distance remains. Christopher R. W. Nevinson (1889–1946), who served with the Friends’ Ambulance Unit in the early months of the war and then returned to the front as a war artist in July 1917, sought to capture the routine, destructive nature of war that had become so familiar to British soldiers. His Survivors at Arras (Fig. 4), in contrast to Bonnard’s distant perspective, situates the viewer in the street opposite these buildings, thereby forcing one to confront these partial ruins as it on-site. The hollows of the bombed-out windows, the roof panels opened up like spying skeletons, and

the tooth-like profiles of the shadows falling across the facades contribute to an atmosphere of profound loneliness. Without the slightest hint of human presence but constructed distinctly on a human scale, Nevinson’s work captures the brutality of battle with haunting beauty.

Paul Nash has been praised for creating a new “calligraphy of war” in the prints he created as a war artist. In his work (Fig. 5), he redrew the visual language of the war into one that emphasized the emptiness, the loneliness and the bitterness of destruction across the natural scene. This lithograph demonstrates with remarkable great the scale of the German devastation of the Belgian landscape. The rain, at once a marker of the region’s distinctive weather but also a dramatic visual motif, animates the setting. The intersecting diagonals of the downpour fracture the immense sky into what appear to be thousands of pieces, conveying the artist’s sense of hopelessness. The landscape here becomes an eternally scorched environment, created through the conventional means of recent ruins and features of lights and darks, devoid of traditional military grandeur. In short, one legend has it that he took at the centre of the scene was a destination for British soldiers when enemy fire grew too overwhelming. Lake Zillebeke may thus have become a sanctuary for men in the Ypres Salient, while Nash depicted it as a symbol of individual salvation.

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The abandonment of such equipment in the landscape speaks to the futility of war and the futility of the human spirit in the face of it. The landscape here is a call to arms, a call to action, a call to remember. The landscape here is a reminder of the human condition and the human experience.

Combinations of images from the home front and the front lines illustrate the power that the foreign war-time landscape possessed. Meathael Bone (1876–1955), an established artist of an older generation who would become that first official war artist, captured with graphic definitions the city of London under threat of invasion. His Piccadilly Circus (Fig. 3) of 1915 beautifully evokes the constant battle and battle of a city under air attack. In an image of London life against the backdrop of dimmed lamplight and searchlights, the subtle indications of the wartime situation. In spite of the detail and richness of the scene, an emotional distance remains. Christopher R. W. Nevinson (1889–1946), who served with the Friends’ Ambulance Unit in the early months of the war and then returned to the front as a war artist in July 1917, sought to capture the routine, destructive nature of war that had become so familiar to British soldiers. His Survivors at Arras (Fig. 4), in contrast to Bonnard’s distant perspective, situates the viewer in the street opposite these buildings, thereby forcing one to confront these partial ruins as it on-site. The hollows of the bombed-out windows, the roof panels opened up like spying skeletons, and

[Fig. 4] Nash concludes his 1917 letter to his wife with a pledge: “I am no longer an artist interested and curious, I am a messenger who will bring back word from men who are fighting for those who want the war to go on for ever. Feakly, inarticulately, will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls!”

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JACQUELINE N. COTTRIE, Bader Curator and Researcher of European Art

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

2. Gough, A Soldier’s Beauty, 15.
5. Gough, A Soldier’s Beauty, 15.
7. Larsen, Landscape, Identity, and War, 13.
As the magnitude of the carnage increased—particularly with the Battle of the Somme (July–November 1916) and its one million casualties among all combatants—those on the battlefield felt compelled to document the horrors of modern warfare. Views of the fighting. Many members of the younger generation of British artists dismantled with excitement, for a variety of reasons, to see the conflict. The phrase “You must not miss a war, if one is going”—borrowed from the famous painter critic—Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957)—alludes to encounters with new novelty and subjects that could stimulate creative production. Others cited the need for a violent razing of the visual language employed by artists in favour of a new paradigm that more readily echoed the pace, rigours and responsibilities of modern life. The sculptor William Robert Colton (1867–1921), for example, lamented the “wave of diseased degeneracy” that had permeated the visual and performing arts in the early years of the twentieth century and placed for its excision in the name of continued progress. Many were overwhelmed by a keen sense of patriotism; Nash, like many of his artist peers, felt the call to serve shortly after the declaration of war in August 1914. Artists typically joined the 54-year-old Artists’ Rifles, a regiment of the British army known officially as the 38th (Middlesex) Battalion, Volunteer Corps. A volunteer unit that trained soldiers in all aspects of infantry life and prepared them for service abroad, the Artists’ Rifles offered a sense of utility and camaraderie among artists who had pledged to serve. In short, the beginning of the Great War seemed to offer opportunities for life-enriching experiences and personal growth.

As the magnitude of the carnage increased—particularly with the Battle of the Somme (July–November 1916) and its one million casualties among all combatants—those on the battlefield felt compelled to document the horrors of modern warfare. Views of the countryside and cities formed an especially moving subset of imagery created at the front. Panorama, landscape was fundamentally historical to the concept of war, for only with the advance and retreat across land-as-territory does war take place.2 Artists portrayed those sites of engagement thereby chronicling the war’s progression in the most basic of terms. Similarly, the utterly ravaged sites of engagement made landscapes an expressive genre for artists. Cities and the countryside, destroyed in horrifying ways through new technologies, offered gripping potential to communicate the horrors of war. Finally, through the manipulation of the visual principle of perspective, the observer could be tacitly invited in ways that called to mind the conditions of individual experience.3 For artists and viewers alike, this aspect of landscape provided a needed corrective to the shockingly mechanized and dehumanizing element of this conflict. Photography [Fig. 2] was a first step in capturing the still ruins, wasted forests and lacerated earth of the French and Belgian battlefields, but those back in Britain craved a more personal commentary as a sign of authentic experience. Tellingly, the first official war artist was commissioned by the British government in 1916, after it was recognized that such photographic documentation had limited public appeal.

Comparisons between images from the home front and the front lines illustrate the power that the foreign warfare landscape possessed. Meathord Bone (1876–1955), an established artist of an older generation who would become that first official war artist, captured with graphic defines the city of London under threat of invasion. His Piccadilly Cross [Fig. 3] of 1915 beautifully evokes the combined battle and battle of the bombshell. London’s life against the backdrop of dismantled transport and searchlights, the subtle indications of the wartime situation. In spite of the detail and richness of the scene, an emotional distance emerges. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson (1889–1946), who served with the Friends’ Ambulance Unit in the early months of the war and then returned to the front as a war artist in July 1917, sought to capture the routines, destructive nature of war that had become so familiar to British soldiers. His Survivors at Arras [Fig. 4] is another instance of this style, in contrast to Bonnard’s diarist perspective, situates the viewer in the street opposite these buildings, thereby forcing one to confront these urban sites as it on site. The hollowed-out of the bombed-out windows, the roof beams exposed like spiny skeletons, and the teeth-like profiles of the shadows falling across the facades contributes to an atmosphere of profound loss. Without the slightest hint of human presence but constructed distinctly on a human scale, Nevinson’s work captures the brutality of battle with haunting beauty.

Paul Nash has been praised for creating a new “calligraphy of war” in the prints he created as a war artist.4 In his work [Fig. 5], he redrew the visual language of the war into one that emphasizes the emptiness, the loneliness and the barrenness of destruction across the natural scene. This lithograph demonstrates with remarkable gravity the scale of the German devastations of the Belgian landscape. The rain, at once a marker of the regions distinctive weather but also a dramatic visual motif, animates the setting. The intersecting diagonals of the downpour fracture the immense sky yet appear to be thousands of pieces, conveying the artist’s sense of hopelessness. The landscape here becomes an eerily scorching environment, created through the conventional means of recession views and contrasts of lights and darks, devoid of traditional military grammar or signs. Nash, we are led to believe that the site at the centre of the scene was a destination for British soldiers when enemy fire grew too overwhelming. Lake Zillebeke may thus have become a sanctuary for men in the Ypres salient, while Nash’s depiction of it can be seen as a eulogy to individual salvation.

Percy John Doll’s Smith (1885–1940) served as a sergeant on the Western Front in 1914, and he later undertook a series of prints based on his private sketches of the battlefield. In spite of not holding the official title of war artist, he assumed the charge of depicting “war as it is” with haunting sobriety.5 His Wither? Whither?6 A Deck Night in France 1917 [Fig. 5] communicates the infinite, withered terrain typical of western European battlefields. The loneliness and isolation, that distance recall the military nature of activities that took place on this site. Their lingering presence after those activities, however, underscores the transformation of the land from a military zone to more countryside.7 The abandonment of such equipment in the landscape speaks to an environment of exhaustion and despair, echoing the hopelessness of Nash’s words.

2. Gosse, A Terrible Beauty, 35.
5. Gosse, A Terrible Beauty, 57.
“I have just returned, last night, from a visit to Brigade Headquarters up the line and I shall not forget it as long as I live. I have seen the most frightful nightmare of a country more conceived by Dante or Poe than by nature.... It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless.”

—Paul Nash to his wife Margaret, 13 November 1917—

All works from the collection of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, unless otherwise noted.


Figure 1: Paul Nash, Rain, Lake Zillebeke, lithograph on paper, 1918. Gift of Simon and Caroline Davis, 2018 (61-002.01). Photo: Bernard Clark.

Figure 2: Passchendaele Mud, photograph, 1917. Canadian War Museum, Ottawa. George Metcalf Archival Collection (CWM 19930013-511).

Figure 3: Muirhead Bone, Piccadilly Circus, 1915, drypoint and etching on paper. Gift of Simon and Caroline Davis, 2017 (60-013.01). Photo: Bernard Clark.

Figure 4: Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, Survivors at Arras, 1917, drypoint on paper. Gift of Simon and Caroline Davis, 2017 (60-014.02). Photo: Bernard Clark.

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Figure 3: Mainroad Bone, Piccadilly Circus, 1915, drypoint and etching on paper. Gift of Simon and Caroline Davis, 2018 (61-002.03). Photo: Bernard Clark.

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UNSPEAKABLE LANDSCAPES
PRINTMAKERS AT WAR
1914–1918

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Fig. 5