

# THE ART OF WAR

For many young artists and writers, the devastation of war served as a powerful spur to creativity. Abi Millar delves into some of the artistic talents who forged their reputation during World War I

In 1914, the young English poet Rupert Brooke wrote his most famous poem, *The Soldier*. A Petrarchan sonnet (a form commonly used in love poetry), the poem adds a certain romance to warfare: 'If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England.'

*The Soldier* was penned right at the start of WWI, while Brooke was on leave for

Christmas. Despite emphasising death, it is far from anti-war – in fact, it positions the war almost as a morally purifying force. Another of Brooke's sonnets, *Peace*, goes further. Here, God has 'wakened us from sleeping' to revitalise 'a world grown old and cold and weary'.

Many early war poems have a propagandist bent. Take Thomas Hardy's *Men Who March Away*, which was written in

September 1914 shortly after a government conference: 'Press we to the field ungrieving, / In our heart of hearts believing / Victory crowns the just'. Hardy believed this was a just war with an honorable intent, and his poem (which was soon set to music as a marching song) is one of many to mythologise Englishness.

It is striking, then, to think that Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est* – one of

the most powerful anti-war poems ever written – was composed just three years later. The speaker begins by cataloguing the gruesome effects of chlorine gas ('the white eyes writhing in his face...the blood / Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs').

He contrasts this imagery against the pro-war propaganda told 'with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory / Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori' (the

Latin means 'it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country'). Fittingly, the first draft of the poem was dedicated to Jessie Pope, a jingoistic poet whose verses encouraged enlistment.

Rupert Brooke, who died of sepsis in early 1915, never witnessed the shift from enthusiasm to horror, from glorification to moral revulsion. And though it would be reductive to say that all art of the time showed this trajectory, it is part of how successive generations have come to remember WWI.

By and large, as the war went on, nationalist sentiment was dimmed, and the senseless brutality of the fighting became harder to ignore. For many of those on the frontline, it was no longer possible to find any kind of meaning in their suffering. Siegfried Sassoon wrote about the 'callous complacency' of those at home; the 'smug-faced crowds... who cheer when soldier lads march by'. For him, the war was a 'fruitless harvest'.

As Wilfred Owen famously stated in 1918, his poetry was not about 'glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power... My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity'. By this stage, any other response seemed glib.

The same shift is apparent in the visual arts, which run the gamut from straightforward propaganda through to abstract depictions of loss and destruction. On the one hand, we have mythological paintings like 'Blood and Iron' by Charles Ernest Butler, in which Jesus is shown comforting Belgium. On the other, we have modernist works like 'A Battery Shelled' by Percy Wyndham Lewis, which depicts soldiers as dehumanised and puppet-like.

All these artistic responses continue to shape our interpretations of the war, perhaps even more so than straightforward historical accounts. Below, I profile two artists who have been particularly instrumental in this regard: Siegfried Sassoon from the world of poetry, and Paul Nash from the visual arts.

## Siegfried Sassoon

Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) had published poems in his youth, but it was his scathing war poetry that made his reputation.

Described by one critic as 'harshly realistic laments or satires', his work is known for its striking detail. In fact, it is arguable that there would have been no Wilfred Owen without Siegfried Sassoon (the two were friends, and the latter a great influence on the former).

Perhaps surprisingly, Sassoon's early war poetry was romantic in tone. 'War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise, / And, fighting for our freedom, we are free' he wrote in *Absolution* (1915).

It wasn't till later in the war – by which time Sassoon had lost his brother – that his signature gritty realism began to emerge. In *The Poet As Hero* (1916), he alludes specifically to this change in poetic purpose: 'You've heard me, scornful, harsh, and discontented, / Mocking and loathing War: you've asked me why / Of my old, silly sweetness I've repented – / My ecstasies changed to an ugly cry'.

Following the death of a good friend, and meetings with several prominent pacifists, Sassoon wrote a letter to *The Times* protesting against the war. "I believe that this War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it," he said, prompting public outrage. After his friend Robert Graves intervened, stopping him from being court-martialled, Sassoon was hospitalised for shellshock. 🕒



“The shift from enthusiasm to horror, from glorification to moral revulsion... it is part of how successive generations have come to remember WWI



Paul Nash: Ypres Salient at Night © IWM

It was during his convalescence in Craiglockhart War Hospital that he met Wilfred Owen (an encounter fictionalised in Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration*). He later returned to the front, spending time in Palestine and France before returning to England. After the war, he became involved in politics and continued to write, including a trilogy of autobiographical novels.

Many of his best-known poems were written during his various stints in hospital, approaching the subject from a range of angles and personas, but all protest the war.

*The Rear Guard* (1917), for instance, graphically depicts the 'unwholesome air' of the trenches, including a dead soldier 'whose eyes yet wore / Agony dying hard of ten days before; / And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound'.

*Glory of Women* (1918) attacks the simplistic narratives of the female civilians who 'love us when we're heroes, home on leave'. In particular, it lays into nationalism, emphasising that war's horrors know no national bounds: 'O German mother dreaming by the fire, / While you are knitting socks to send your son / His face is trodden deeper in the mud.'

*Repression of War Experience* (1918)

“  
O German mother dreaming  
by the fire, / While you are  
knitting socks to send your son,  
/ His face is trodden deeper  
in the mud

conveys the 'stark, staring' madness of shellshock: 'when thoughts you've gagged all day come back to scare you'. And *Suicide In The Trenches* (1918) uses a sing-song, nursery-rhyme structure to show how horrific events were being occluded.

While Sassoon's poems shocked many early readers, they also struck a chord. Little has changed for readers today. According to the *Times Literary Supplement*: 'The dynamic quality of his war poems was due to the intensity of feeling which underlay their cynicism'.

#### Paul Nash

Paul Nash (1889-1946) was one of the most important landscape artists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a key figure in the development of modernism. His style, always melancholy and haunting, became more surrealist as

time went by. "My love of the monstrous and magical led me beyond the confines of natural appearances into unreal worlds," he wrote as early as 1912.

Above all, he is famous for his war art, with WWI and WWII bookending his career. Having been injured in action and hospitalised, he returned to the trenches in 1917 as an official war artist. Angered by what he witnessed, his goal was to convey the futility of war.

While in the trenches, Nash worked quickly, even frantically, producing up to 12 sketches a day. Upon returning to England, he began to develop these drawings into finished pieces.

His most famous work of this period is perhaps *We Are Making a New World* (1918), an apocalyptic oil-on-canvas painting often compared to Picasso's *Guernica*. Based on an earlier pen-and-ink drawing called *Sunrise: Inverness Copse*, it depicts what remains of a small group of trees after the Battle of Langemarck in Ypres. The landscape is barren, with shattered tree stumps and mounds of earth more redolent of gravestones.

Another notable painting, *The Ypres Salient At Night* (1918), is a night scene with a disturbing beauty: three soldiers on the fire step of a trench are gazing out onto the battlefield, their view lit by a star-like explosion. In another, *The Menin Road* (1919), we see a devastated section of the Ypres battlefield, a cluttered, desolate landscape littered with obstacles.

Since Nash was a commissioned artist, all his work had to be passed by the official censor, and was not permitted to include depictions of dead soldiers. The power and meaning of his work, then, lies in its symbolism – death and devastation prevails with no need to show it literally.

Although the censor could not understand 'Nash's funny pictures', claiming 'I cannot help thinking that Nash is having a huge joke with the British public', his works are now regarded as some of the most powerful and evocative of the period.

'I am a messenger who will bring back word from men fighting to those who want the war to last forever,' wrote Nash in a letter to his wife. 'Feeble, inarticulate will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls.'

Read more about the artistic talent lost and made by WWI at [www.rosl.org.uk/ww1](http://www.rosl.org.uk/ww1)