



*Australian Official War Artists 1916-1918 (1920 George Coates)
Australian War Memorial, Canberra*

ARTISTS OF THE GREAT WAR

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra until June 2017

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ARTISTS of the GREAT WAR

Many of you will be inspired to visit our National Capital to see the exhibition “Versailles – Treasures from the Palace” at the National Gallery, which opened in December 2016 and runs until mid April 2017.

While you are there, I suggest that you turn into the Australian section of the Gallery, and into the room holding this wonderful display of artists’ perceptions of the Great War. This is the conflict as it was described in oil sketches and finished paintings, drawings, prints, posters, books, magazines and a commemorative medal.



“Today the German Monster threatens the world with bloodshed, slavery and death”. Norman Lindsay 1917

The exhibition begins with a selection of government recruitment posters – these initially showed hearty encouragements for men to sign up, but after the defeat of two conscription referenda, more desperate appeals to enlist. Norman Lindsay put his hand to some. Copies of the poster shown alongside were pasted up in secret in 1917.

There is also the work of Australia’s first Official War Artist, the remarkable Will Dyson. He married Ruby Lindsay, sister of Norman (and an artist in her own right) and they all went to London together. In the first years of WWI his cartoons became famous in London and he gained a large intellectual following. He was appointed as official war artist for the AIF in 1916, and his *Australia at War* (1918) remains one of the most powerful tributes to Australian involvement in the conflict.

Dyson’s war drawings are compassionate representations of the lives of ordinary Australian soldiers rather than heroic battle scenes. A detail from his 1918 painting “*Welcome Back to the Somme*” is shown below.



Detail from *"Welcome Back to the Somme"*. Will Dyson 1918.
National Gallery of Australia Gift to the Australian War Memorial 1989.



"These gave the world away".
Hilda Rix Nicholas 1917.

Some artists such as Hilda Rix Nicholas display their grief openly. Her mother and sister died at the outbreak of the war, and in 1916 she married Australian officer George Matson Nicholas who was killed on the front just five weeks later. The grieving widow shares her loss through many paintings and drawings that convey overwhelming personal responses.

The British Ministry of War was concerned that such realistic images would cause alarm and disaffection, and imposed censorship on artists, who were then unable to show the reality of broken and bloody bodies strewn along the front line. Rix Nicholas powerfully expresses the hopelessness of the battlefield and the sacrifices of the soldiers and their families.



"Etaples". Iso Rae 1915.

Along with the 16 male Australian artists appointed by the government and the military to document the conflict, there were two other female artists, Dora Ohlfsen and Iso Rae. Dora Ohlfsen was an expatriate painter and sculptor living in Rome who served with the Red Cross and in 1919 produced the Anzac Medallion. sold "in aid of Australians and New Zealanders maimed in the war".

Iso Rae was living in the French coastal artists' colony of Etaples when war broke out, and she served with the Voluntary Aid Detachment of the British Red Cross at the army base in that town. She documented conditions in the camp between 1915 and 1919

So much about the Great War is about wounding, so there are many hospital pictures – the blood, the mud, the lice and the rats, and dysentery and trench foot.

I thought one of the most powerful images in the exhibition is of a shrouded figure standing amongst ruins – described as a rare example of an Australian modernist response to the destruction of the Great War. It was painted by Australian John Wardell Power, a trained physician who enlisted in the British Forces and was assigned to the Royal Medical Corps from April 1917 until the end of the war.

He then focused on his passion for art, becoming a full-time student and advocate of the modern. His legacy established the Power institute at the University of Sydney and indirectly the Museum of Contemporary Art. Power's involvement in the war had a profound impact on his work, particularly his experiences during the Third and Fourth Battles of Ypres.



Anzac Medallion. Dora Ohlfsen



"Ypres". 1917-1918 London. John Wardell Power.
Australian War Memorial Canberra.