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Abstract
Wars for the most part are men's wars, but they rarely, if ever, take place without the participation and involvement of women. Artists make images to show what happens in wartime, to portray who is involved and what they do. These images convey the artists' personal vision, and they reveal how society perceived these events and people. To this extent artists' visions of women at war reflect the society from which they come.

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Norman Lindsay, "Will you fight now or wait for this?"
Sufferers, Workers, Lovers: Australian Visions of Women at War

ANNA GRAY

Wars for the most part are men's wars, but they rarely, if ever, take place without the participation and involvement of women. Artists make images to show what happens in wartime, to portray who is involved and what they do. These images convey the artists' personal vision, and they reveal how society perceived these events and people. To this extent artists' visions of women at war reflect the society from which they come.

Some of the most enduring images of women in war are those which show them as innocent victims, fleeing from their homes as a result of devastation and grieving as a result of the loss of loved ones. This suffering was dramatized in the First World War recruiting posters which portrayed women as helpless and in need of being saved from the vile, marauding German brutes who might invade Australia. In 'The peril to Australia' Norman Lindsay depicted German troops conquering an Australian town and threatening its women residents and in 'Will you fight now or wait for this?' (See p. 182) he showed German soldiers aiming guns at an Australian farmer and his wife. Lindsay's images seem melodramatic because the scenes are located in a particular historic moment and because with the wisdom of hindsight viewers know that such events never happened and were never likely to have taken place. However, elsewhere, in Europe, women were vulnerable, the victims of war. Dyson showed this in his drawing, 'First bombardment of Hazebrouck' (1917), which conveys the suffering of women whose homes have been destroyed. Dyson portrayed these women's despair and dejection through their poses and expressions: one woman sits with hunched shoulders hugging herself for comfort, another rests her hand on her cheek and stares blankly outwards, another stands with her hands on her hips with her eyes on the ground, as if waiting for inspiration as to what she should do, and a fourth turns from the scene, taking a last look back. The scene is a wartime one, but it suggests any group of women who have lost their homes: these effects could have been caused by earthquake, fire and
flood. This image has a universal power and conveys not just the vulnerability of women, but of human beings in general. A. Henry Fullwood’s ‘Street in le Cateau’ (1919) also portrays a peasant woman deprived of her home in a bomb-damaged street. However, Fullwood juxtaposed the bent figure of a lonely woman and her barrowful of worldly possessions with uniformed men immersed in conversation. Through this contrast Fullwood suggested that the impact of war was different for citizen and soldier, that the old woman was defenceless in a way the men were not. Fullwood reminded the viewer that war is not an act of nature, but an intentional act, and that someone is responsible for the havoc wreaked upon hapless bystanders (who are often women).

The suffering of women as innocent victims has changed from war to war. In the Second World War women experienced hideous treatment in internment and prisoner of war camps. Alan Moore drew the civilian internees at Belsen in April 1945. He was one of the first Australians to visit this camp and his images were later received in Australia with bewilderment. His drawing, ‘Blind man in Belsen’ (1945), depicts women and men walking around a bleak landscape like wraiths among the dead and dying. He portrays the five living beings as isolated shapes, immersed in their grief.

The best known images of women as victims from the Vietnam War are those in posters such as ‘August mobilisation to end the war in Vietnam’ which focuses on the agonized face of a weeping Vietnamese woman. In the Vietnam War the tables were turned: in this war it was not the enemy who were depicted performing atrocities, but the Americans and Australians who were accused of being responsible for the misery of village women in Vietnam. These posters were only one aspect of Australia’s participation in the war, but they were a powerful emotional weapon for those campaigning for peace. Once again in the Gulf War, Kevin Connor portrays women as war victims in images such as ‘Old woman in the town square at Najaf’ (1991) and ‘Refugees’ (1991). In depicting the destructiveness of war and the suffering it brings, Connor does not just focus solely on the women; he also portrays a man whose family died when his house was bombed in a Basrah suburb. In ‘Refugees’, he depicts those who walked for miles through the desert under the stars, heading for the borders to the north. Like artists of previous wars, Connor’s drawings emphasize the effect of war on innocent bystanders. It is not necessary to know the details of the campaigns to feel for these women.

George Lambert’s ‘La croix de guerre’ (1922) is a poignant expression of the grief of women and old men when their sons and husbands die in war. Lambert depicted the wife, mother and father of a serviceman who has died. Their suffering is individual, the mother sobs into her handkerchief, the wife faints, and the father staring in bewilderment
and shock; but the family is interlocked through their linked arms, which suggests united strength and support. Lambert captured the way death can be felt among a closed group, with each person locked in their private emotions, but bound by a common sorrow. The context is one of war, but the events depicted are those with which most women and men who have lost someone close to them can identify. After the Second World War, Weaver Hawkins and Noel Kilgour, in ‘Two minutes silence’ (1953, see p. 191) and ‘War’s aftermath’, respectively, pay tribute to the sorrow of women left behind with fatherless children. And in his Gulf War etching, ‘Mother and child’ (1991), George Gittoes portrays a grieving woman, draped in black, with her dead child in her lap. Again, it does not matter whether these women are friend or foe, we feel for them in their suffering, for it is an experience which we can all understand, in which we are all one. Roslyn Evans, in ‘All the fine young men: In the middle of 1990 as Saddam and Bush rattled their sabres’ (1992, see p. 191) looks at this theme from a different vantage point of a woman’s perspective. Instead of recording events after the fact; women’s sorrow when a loved one has died in war, she creates an image which conveys women’s ongoing nightmare, that their sons will be asked to go to war and be killed. She writes on to the glass face of the work her heartfelt wish ‘that [her] sons will never have to undergo any war experience for any reason’. She engraved this prayer in the hope that she would never have to carve a tombstone for her sons.

While just as many suffered and grieved in the Second World War as in the first, women were not shown as sufferers in Second World War posters. This may have been because it was no longer thought appropriate to portray women as victims in a war in which they played an active role in the factories, farms and forces. In this war, posters, billboards and shop displays promoted a beautiful woman with a beatific smile, holding an infant to her chest. This nurturing mother, this woman with inner strength and confidence, was the woman the men were asked to fight for.

Even in the First World War, women were shown to have another presence, to have determination and resilience. Australian women’s participation in the First World War was severely restricted: on the home front they raised funds, helped in recruitment campaigns, kept family farms going while their men were away and provided comforts by packing parcels and knitting socks. Grace Cossington Smith’s ‘The sock knitter’ (1915) conveys the archetypal patient, meditative woman, absorbed in her work. The image draws much of its strength from its simplicity of line, as the woman’s lowered eyes lead directly down, through the white blouse to her active hands, the focus of the picture. The eyes, the hands, create a mood of intense concentration on the task at hand. Cossington Smith portrayed a woman (her sister Madge, seated in the garden studio at the family home) knitting socks to send
to soldiers in the trenches; but this painting is not generally thought of as a war picture because its theme of calm concentration is one which is timeless. Nonetheless it is a powerful image of the fortitude of women during war.

George Coates’s ‘Arrival of first Australian wounded from Gallipoli at Wandsworth Hospital, London’ (1921, see p. 192) portrays the strength of women as saintly carers. Coates showed the devotion of the nurses by posing the women around the recumbent figure like guardian angels, and by placing them within the orbit of the ray of light which flows symbolically through the window on to the body of the wounded man. The nurses’ static poses remove them from the everyday world, and dignify them by giving them an aura of calm endurance. The lofty hall gives the scene a sense of significance. The mood of reverence in this painting matches the tone of C. E. W. Bean’s comments about Australian nurses in the Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18, where he wrote that ‘no womanhood has ever presented a richer association of feminine tenderness and sheer capacity’. Like Bean, Coates paid tribute to the nurses’ ability and their dedication to the soldiers’ care. In the Second World War artists again portrayed nurses as carers, performing a variety of tasks, but they portrayed these women without any saintly overtones.

In the Second World War artists painted women at work in many arenas, they showed members of the Australian Women’s Army Service (AWAS) performing a variety of tasks, as well as workers in factories. Whether by chance or choice a number of women artists depicted the more traditionally regarded womanly activities: canteen workers, camouflage net and quilt makers, workers in clothing factories, as well as nursing. These women are shown as busy, active participants, as opposed to those from the First World War who quietly waited like the ‘sock knitter’. They are portrayed as ordinary people in routine situations as opposed to Coates’s rarefied saints.

Sybil Craig’s images of munitions workers, such as ‘No. 1 Projectile Shop, Maribyrnong’ (1945, see p. 193), convey these factory women’s commitment to their work, their involvement in their job. Craig was an official war artist during the Second World War and spent much of her time with the women at the Commonwealth Explosives Factory, Maribyrnong, getting to know them, watching them perform a wide variety of tasks and learning about their daily working lives. She provided over forty images of munitions workers, a detailed record of their exacting work and their mechanical environment. In her explanations of the activities she depicted, she recorded the output of the girls and their length of service, and she noted the strains placed on workers in the TNT room. In her use of vibrant colours and a thick paint surface she evoked a sense of lively activity and a feeling of spirited interaction among the women.
Nora Heysen’s images of women’s medical work likewise portray a commitment to regular work. Like Craig, Heysen was an official war artist during the Second World War. She spent part of her time with the women and men working in the blood and serum preparations unit of the Sydney hospital. ‘Separating blood’ (1944, see p. 194) shows Private Thorpe with an array of jars and tubes used for separating blood and ‘Typing blood’ (1944) depicts Lieutenant McNeil working with test tubes and glass plates. These images show women seriously undertaking complex tasks. There is a marked difference between these images and Roy Hodgkinson’s drawings, ‘Sister Joan Box’ (1944) and ‘Captain Constance Box’ (1944, see p.195). Unlike Heysen, Hodgkinson does not show his women committed to their work, but rather as if they were modelling clothes: Hodgkinson does not depict what these nurses do, but what they wear. He portrayed Constance in tropical uniform after ‘scrubbing up’, looking at the mask in her hands, before putting it on, and he showed Joan at a later stage of dress, wearing her mask and gown and pulling on her rubber gloves. In these images the valuable work these women performed is reduced to a fashion parade. Hodgkinson’s drawings reveal his background as a newspaper illustrator. They seem today to be masculine trivializations and glamorizations of women’s work, although they may not have been intended to be, or been recognized as such, at the time.

If Hodgkinson was consciously or unconsciously sexist in his approach to women’s war work, Lyndon Dadswell, in ‘Munition workers’ (1942, see p. 196), paid tribute to women as partners in the workforce, and conveyed the strength of union among workers. Dadswell did not illustrate the practical details of the everyday activities of munition workers, but showed the solidarity of the woman and man by reducing their figures to simple forms, linking them together, and concentrating their gaze in a single direction. Dadswell turned these figures into heroes. He not only treated women as equals but symbolically paid homage to the importance of their work: their contribution to the defence of Australia. Dadswell realized in three-dimensional form, Curtin’s claim that the workers were fundamental to the war effort, that without them the nation would not have been able to continue to wage war.

In the imagery from the Vietnam and Gulf Wars women are rarely shown as active participants. Nurses and female entertainers went to Vietnam, but they were not depicted; nor were women on the home front. Kevin Connor drew Mother Teresa in Baghdad, when she visited this city to look after the refugees in the months immediately after the Gulf War, but, as others have done, Connor saw this woman as a guardian angel, devoting herself to the weak and needy. However, George Gittoes portrayed women as active participants in the peacekeeping forces sent to Somalia and Cambodia. In works such as
'Corporal Julie Baranowski, Military Police, searching Somali women' (1993, see p. 197) and 'Sergeant Jodie Clark' (1993), he showed these women as strong and assertive, playing a vital role in the field.

As well as showing women as innocent victims and as active workers, the imagery of war shows women as sexual beings. Will Dyson's lithograph, 'Compensation' (1918, see p. 197) conveys the perennial courtship game, the exchanges between two people who are attracted to each other. Dyson portrayed a woman's communication with a soldier in which the two protagonists stand apart in their separate worlds, and yet are visually drawn together through eye contact and physical stance. In 'Balcony, Troopers' Ward, 14th Australian General Hospital' (1919) George Lambert likewise portrayed a woman's liaison with a soldier. The setting and artistic approach are distinct, but in both lithograph and oil the relationship is similar: the woman and soldier stand apart, making shy, tentative approaches to each other.

Numerous wartime images focus on the relationships between men and women, and provide a range of complex attitudes towards women's relationships with servicemen. There is a predominant trend towards coyness during the First World War and a developing sexual liberation in the Second. Cecil Hartt's cartoon, 'The swank' (1917) conveys a woman's satisfaction in 'catching' a soldier. The unsophisticated digger is the centre of attention, lounging in an armchair, with his young girlfriend beside him, wearing his badge, and her mother looking on with admiration. Hartt obtained humour from the paradox of the match, an incongruity which has become more absurd, and implausible, through time.7

Noel Counihan's 'Woman and soldier (Pick-up)' (1942) and Frances Lymburner's 'Soldier with girlfriend' (1942-44, see p. 198) are Second World War presentations of the courtship game. They resemble First World War images like Hartt's 'Mary had a little lamb' and Barker's 'A helping hand' which also show a girl walking arm in arm with a soldier. In the First World War images the girl is pretty and the digger is a jovial larrikin and in Counihan's drawing she is dwarfed by the American GI, so that the partnership seems unequal, but in Lymburner's version they appear suited to each other. The rifle on Lymburner's woman's shoulder, suggests a proprietorial interest in the soldier who accompanies her. Lymburner's expressive line gives the couple a breezy, carefree feeling which, apart from the menacing presence of the gun, detaches the couple from the harsh reality of war. Lymburner portrayed a couple comfortable in each other's presence; in 'Back home' (1945) Sali Herman portrayed the joy of two people reunited. Unlike Dyson's and Lambert's representations of coy meetings, Herman's image shows a couple warmly embracing at the Sydney docks after a troopship has arrived. He captured the unity of
the couple by portraying them fused into one whole, and emphasized their total absorption in each other by showing them bound together and isolated in space.

In ‘One Sunday afternoon, in Townsville’ (1942, see p. 199), Roy Hodgkinson provided an openly sensual depiction of the courtship game. This drawing shows the interchange between several couples attracted to each other in a public arena, the beach at Townsville. The women are close by the men, and have physical contact with them. They have a sensuality because Hodgkinson conveyed kinaesthetic values: he portrayed the tension in the buttocks and showed the taut muscles in the legs. But in their stylized poses these figures seem unreal: the stenographer lying on the sand could be a period pin-up, and the soldier standing on the right resembles a male model. This image is located in time: such an open image of sexuality would not have been drawn by an Australian artist in the First World War, and such a detached view would not have been created in later wars.

In these examples women are viewed as sexual beings, and their relations with men are looked upon with approval. In other images artists depicted women as sexual beings in a less favourable light. In ‘The other virgin of Albert’ (1918, see p. 200) Dyson portrayed the lady profiteers who flirted with the Germans. He depicted his ‘virgin’ as a plump figure in a closely fitting evening dress. This is the female equivalent of the fat men, the capitalists, whom Dyson represented as living in a world of advantage in his prewar Daily Herald cartoons. Dyson showed both women and men to be puffed out with swollen vanity and proud self-assertion. This woman’s ‘success’ is a result of the war, but the parallel between her prosperity and that of the peacetime capitalists demonstrates that this image is about any woman or man involved in profiteering at any time. Dyson did not regard this woman as a sexual being, but as a profiteer, and it is not her sexuality that he condemned, but the use she made of it. However, in ‘Victory Girls’ (1943) Albert Tucker presented the sexuality of two women as if it were a demotic, primitive power. Tucker reported that he based this painting on a newspaper story about girls doing a strip-tease for soldiers in a back alley. He later admitted that he was then an outraged Edwardian puritan, and that the intense sense of personal indignation he expressed in the painting reflected Australian war-time fears and outrage at women’s sexuality. Whereas Dyson was concerned with the profiteering aspect of the sexual activity, Tucker was more alarmed at the sexual liberation of the women. During the First World War no Australian artist portrayed the sexuality of women with such disgust as Tucker did in the second.

In the examples considered women are viewed on the one hand as weak and vulnerable and as innocent sufferers, and on the other hand as nurturers and partners in the workforce. They are seen as sexual
beings, but their sexuality is perceived by different artists with varying perspectives. These images of women emphasize that the place of women in war is multifaceted and goes beyond their role in the women’s services. Because the artists portrayed subjects which had meaning for them as individuals, the images of women at war are highly selective, but they are important in obtaining a perspective of the time, for they emphasize what was seen and felt to matter.

NOTES

1. Goya showed peasants fleeing from their homes, families in despair and anguish as a result of famine and women being raped, in his ‘Disasters of war’ (1863). The scene is all too familiar from present day conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda.

2. In composition this work can be related to an American poster, ‘We need you’ (V1070): in both works a nurse leans over a soldier and there is an upright figure on the left and, in both, light streams in from above onto the patient.

3. Wandsworth Hospital was a converted school. Coates worked as an orderly for almost four years in this hospital and painted this subject from personal experience.


5. A different view of nursing during the First World War was given by Jessie Traill, an Australian artist who paid her way to England to serve as a VAD and who illustrated step by step the details of her routine on night-duty in the hospital where she worked in England before going to France. Traill drew a cartoon of ‘A day at Gifford House’ where the VAD is depicted performing routine chores. Traill did not in any way see herself as a saint, nor particularly as an embodiment of tenderness or devotion, but as someone who went about her work, which happened to be helping sick soldiers to recover.


7. David Barker’s ‘A helping hand’, drawn for a cover of Kia-ora Cooee, is reminiscent of Hartt’s ‘The swank’. Both show a pretty girl with an uncultured digger, and portray the Australian soldier laughing at himself and his circumstances.

8. During the Second World War there was tension between Australian and American servicemen because of reports and rumours that while Australians fought overseas, Americans seduced their wives and girlfriends. However, this drawing which portrays Australian soldiers on leave from New Guinea, members of the American Army Corps including black Americans, members of the WAAAF and AWAS, and stenographers with the Australian Army Intelligence and the American Provost Corps, shows little sign of friction or racism.


10. However, the German war artist Otto Dix did view women in this way in post-war images like ‘Girl before a mirror’ (1921).
Roslyn Evans, 'All the fine young men: In the middle of 1990 as Saddam and Bush rattled their sabres'
George Coates, ‘Arrival of first Australian wounded from Gallipoli at Wandsworth Hospital, London’
Sybil Craig, ‘No. 1 Projectile Shop, Maribyrnong’
Nora Heysen, ‘Separating blood’
Roy Hodgkinson, 'Captain Constance Box'
Lyndon Dadswell, 'Munition workers'
George Gittoes, ‘Corporal Julie Baranowski, Military Police, Searching Somali women’

Will Dyson, ‘Compensation (Back at the wagon lines)’
Frances Lymburner, 'Soldier with girlfriend'
Roy Hodgkinson, ‘One Sunday afternoon in Townsville’
Will Dyson, 'The other virgin of Albert'