

INTRODUCTION

On 4 August 1914 large crowds gathered in London's principal public spaces to celebrate – or in some cases denounce – the imminent outbreak of the European war. In Trafalgar Square the maffickers' chants were so loud that according to at least one eye-witness they were still echoing some twenty minutes after they had been sung.¹ Trafalgar Square was certainly an appropriate venue for such martial proceedings: conceived to commemorate Britain's victory in the Napoleonic wars a century earlier, it was arguably the nation's most belligerent political arena. The space, after all, was populated by military statuary, and surrounded by buildings that proclaimed the country's imperial might. One of those buildings, however, was the National Gallery. Devoted to beauty, peace and a common European spirit as expressed through the continent's art, the institution had for decades occupied an uneasy relationship with its bellicose surroundings.² But as the war crowds ambushed its steps and transformed them into makeshift grandstands for their demonstrations, the future of that relationship seemed unusually uncertain.

For the many commentators who spent the late summer of 1914 speculating on art's likely place in the society that was about to be forged on the anvil of war, the scenes in Trafalgar Square might have suggested a number of possibilities. Pessimists might have seen the crowd's submersion of the National Gallery as a worrying sign that the delicate world of art was going to be crushed by waves of philistine 'war fury'.³ Optimists, on the other hand, may well have interpreted the public's decision to gather *there*, on the steps of a *museum*, as heralding a new alliance between art and society – a return of the long-estranged cultural domain into the heart of heroic human affairs. But there were others who surely noticed that in the face of those marauding crowds, indeed throughout the momentous events of early August, the National Gallery's doors had remained locked.⁴ The realists among them might have concluded that despite superficial appearances, artistic life and public life would remain as obstinately discrete as they had been before the war.

2 / British Art and the First World War, 1914–1924

Before 1914 art had indeed played a relatively minor role in British public life. At the outbreak of war the art world was admittedly large – it consisted of thousands of artists, dealers, organizations, museums and critics that were proliferating by the day – but its public reach and official recognition remained limited.⁵ Exhibition attendances were small and static; arts coverage in the national press was sporadic at best and negligible at worst; and the government's support for art was inferior to that which was provided in comparable European countries. Moreover, if this British indifference to visual art was famously longstanding (the artist and critic Roger Fry described it as 'pathological'), it had if anything been emboldened in the decades before the war.⁶ From the 1870s and 1880s onwards, progressive artists and aesthetes had repeatedly challenged the philistinism of popular and official taste, and by 1914 the most advanced artistic trends were dismissive of, if not altogether hostile to, the larger public.⁷ This had alienated the public yet further, and thus widened the gap between the British art world and mainstream society. By the outbreak of war the two spheres seemed all but irreconcilable, and many concluded that the only satisfactory solution was a policy of mutual disregard.⁸

Many members of the art world hoped that the outbreak of war would not end the cultural independence that they believed was a condition of aesthetic purity. In the first war issue of the *Burlington Magazine* – a major journal which more than any other represented this world-view – a brief 'special notice' declared its editor's intentions:

In the face of the present international situation, we must expect that for a time interest in art and the history of art is likely to give place to more violent claims on the attention of the public. We feel it to be none the less of the utmost importance, at such a time, to keep alive those disinterested activities which are the distinguishing mark of civilization. Even though the appeal that art makes is feebler than the more pressing demands of self-preservation, it is more persistent and more enduring.⁹

The *Burlington Magazine*, in other words, proposed that as wartime society ignored art, so art should ignore wartime society. It certainly upheld its part of the bargain – at least initially. The pages that followed featured essays about Rembrandt and Petrus Christus, the portraits of Michelangelo, the stylistic development of central Italian medals, and an extended discussion of a newly discovered head of Constantine the Great – but they made hardly any reference to the ongoing conflagration.

Most people, however, believed that the art world could no longer insulate itself from its immediate context, and the optimists among them believed that

3 / Introduction

the war might actually be *good* for art. As it happened, the conflict helped end the biggest pre-war threat to artworks – the suffragettes – with an amnesty, and on 20 August the National Gallery reopened to the public for the first time since May.¹⁰ Inside, visitors would have seen in Uccello's *Battle of San Romano*, in war pictures by van Huchtenburgh, Weier and Wouwermans and in a set of newly acquired Napoleonic battle paintings by Vernet, centuries of proof that great art and great wars were two sides of the same coin. Meanwhile, critics assembled grand art-historical trajectories – from the origins of art 'where artist and warrior were one', through ancient battle reliefs, the military works of Leonardo and Michelangelo and the modern war paintings of West, Goya and Verestchagin – to confirm that, as one declared, 'never does genius flourish as it flourishes in times of disaster'.¹¹ Most of these essays relied heavily on a passage in George Moore's *Modern Painting*, from 1893:

The Greek sculptors came after Salamis and Marathon; the Italian renaissance came when Italy was distracted with revolution and was divided into opposing states ... Art came upon Holland after heroic wars in which the Dutchmen vehemently asserted their nationhood ... Art came upon England when England was most adventurous, after the victories of Marlborough. Art came upon France after the great revolution, after the victories of Marengo and Austerlitz, after the burning of Moscow.¹²

All, however, including Moore, were ultimately informed by John Ruskin's 1865 exposition of a 'creative and foundational war' in *The Crown of Wild Olive*, which – if ever forgotten – was now being seared into public consciousness by a patriotic press:

All the pure and noble arts of peace are founded on war ... There is no great art possible to a nation but that which is based on battle ... As peace is established or extended in Europe, the arts decline ... All the great nations learned their truth of word, and strength of thought, in war; that they were nourished in war, and wasted by peace; taught by war, and deceived by peace; trained by war, and betrayed by peace – in a word, that they were born in war, and expired in peace.¹³

At the core of Ruskin's formulation and all those who reiterated it lay the abiding conviction that, for all its concomitant hardships, war was an invaluable source of artistic inspiration. This widespread belief not only persuaded artists to enlist in order to 'strengthen their art by physical and moral courage and ... adventure, risk and daring';¹⁴ it also convinced cultural commentators that 'a true Renaissance of Art might be brought about under the stress of a noble and all-pervading emotion'.¹⁵

4 / British Art and the First World War, 1914–1924

The nature of this renaissance predictably depended on each prognosticator's aesthetic predispositions. Reactionaries like A. C. R. Carter (editor of *The Year's Art*) maintained that the conflict would obliterate the noxious currents of modernist experiment that had been gathering force in the years before the war. He wrote: 'It will sweep away cant and insincerity, the slipshod and the shirk, above all the fumbling worship of strange gods in the mad camps of the mungo inventors of epileptic distortion and fungoid colour.'¹⁶ Radicals conversely believed that it would finally scuttle the moribund traditions that had stifled cultural progress for decades: the English painter C. R. W. Nevinson famously declared that the war would represent a 'violent incentive to Futurism' because there was 'no beauty except in strife, and no masterpiece without aggressiveness'.¹⁷ Reactionaries and radicals nevertheless concurred that whether it was a 'sovereign disinfectant', a 'cleansing purge' or a 'purifying fire', the war would ultimately be a remedial cultural force.¹⁸ 'The medicine is severe', concluded one contemporary, 'but we have no fear of its destroying the body along with the pimples.'¹⁹

Not everyone, however, was convinced that the war would leave the body unscathed. And thus while optimistic commentators assembled historical surveys to demonstrate that war and art were age-old allies, pessimists composed alternative narratives to prove that they were age-old adversaries. In one of these essays, the director of the National Gallery himself, C. J. Holmes, reminded his readers of the looting and destruction that had gone hand in hand with conflict for centuries. Holmes cited the theft of artworks in Spain and Italy under Napoleon as well as the Franco-British ruination of Peking's Summer Palace during the Opium Wars with China in 1860. He had no reason to think matters would be different this time round:

War is no longer waged with arrows and lances, or tardy muskets, but carried on both on earth and in the air with high explosives that blow to atoms all that they strike, and strike haphazard from afar. We have thus no guarantee whatever that this struggle between the enlightened or Christian nations of Europe will not be just as destructive to fine things as the wars waged by the barbarous conquerors of the past whom we are accustomed to execrate.²⁰

It wasn't long before Holmes was vindicated. Although the Hague Peace Conference of 1907 had legislated that cultural institutions should be spared from all future violence, they became collateral damage before even a month of fighting was out.²¹ On 25 August 1914 German forces sacked the town of Louvain and destroyed numerous cultural treasures there including the University Library and its 230,000 books, 800 incunabula and 950 manuscripts.²² In the following weeks numerous architectural masterpieces – including Reims cathedral – were

5 / Introduction

damaged or destroyed, and there were even reports of widespread looting of art collections, at least one instance of which was allegedly perpetrated by the German Crown Prince.²³

Other pessimists felt that the war's threats to art were not simply physical. Some were concerned that the conflict would make an already philistine community even more unsympathetic to 'high' culture. In a September 1914 essay called 'Art after Armageddon', one commentator surveyed these bleak visions of the future:

In the press of conflict we find out what we really value, and it is usually assumed that art of every kind will be one of the first things we shall do without. We are shown the picture of a relapse into barbarism: a world fighting for existence, the necessities of life – a few of the coarser luxuries retained, the refinements of existence despised. How is it possible, we are, moreover, asked, for the artist to concentrate his mind on the pursuit of his ideal at a moment of acute anxiety, and with tales of carnage on every hand?²⁴

Others were more concerned about the war's economic ramifications. Lawrence Haward, who became the first director of the Manchester Art Gallery in 1914, remarked that 'when the money and the energy of a nation are devoted to the prosecution of a war, little may be left for the enjoyment of what is unhappily regarded too often as a luxury'. He concluded:

There is no reason for supposing that the present war will differ from others in its effects and will give birth to masterpieces as some are expecting it to do. It is much more likely to nip them in the bud by bringing about conditions unfavourable to the artist and his work and by killing those who might have produced them.²⁵

A hundred years after the events of 1914, scholars seem as compulsively drawn to grand diagnoses of the First World War's cultural consequences as had been their predecessors. Moreover, their discussions still break down along surprisingly similar lines: they continue to debate whether the conflict's effects were constructive, destructive, progressive or regressive in nature, and how broad and lasting those changes ultimately were.²⁶ Most, however, have sided with the pessimists of 1914 and concluded that the war was ultimately detrimental to art. The clearest evidence for this conclusion has been biographical. Over the last few decades, art historians have exhaustively recounted the experiences of the many young artists whose peacetime careers were cut short when they went to the front; how the horrific events they witnessed undermined their creative confidence, altered their stylistic trajectories and challenged the viability of artistic representation itself; how their professional integrity was compromised by

6 / British Art and the First World War, 1914–1924

official employment and propagandism; and how a number of them – including Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Umberto Boccioni, Raymond Duchamp-Villon and Franz Marc – perished in battle and never fulfilled their potential.²⁷

These personal tragedies are often seen as part of a much broader cultural setback: one that Benjamin Buchloh has called the ‘collapse of the modernist paradigm’ and others have termed the *rappel à l’ordre*.²⁸ Before the war, modernist movements and avant-garde factions were beginning to flourish in almost every country in Europe. These groupings, however, depended on specific social conditions that were largely obliterated by the conflict. Cubism in France, Expressionism in Germany, Futurism in Italy and Vorticism in Britain consequently saw their members dispersed, their audiences distracted and their fragile markets dissipated.²⁹ This process was particularly damaging in Britain. Vorticism had only antedated the war by a matter of months, and British modernism in general was not established enough to survive the conflict intact. Many British artists simply abandoned the progressive styles with which they had flirted before the war, and most never returned to them. Art historians have traditionally seen this as a disappointing, if not disastrous, development: the war, they have concluded, ended a promisingly radical moment in British art and produced in its aftermath an insular and reactionary period characterized by ‘stagnation’, ‘uncertainty’ and ‘retreat’.³⁰

The *rappel à l’ordre*, however, was not quite as definitive as that. More recently, scholars have shown that cultural experimentation did survive the conflict in one way or another, whether it took the form of a ‘pacifist modernism’ or an ‘adaptive revisionism’.³¹ Moreover, art historians have claimed that for all the aesthetic failures that came with so much official employment, the nation’s best war art (by the likes of Paul and John Nash, Stanley Spencer, C. R. W. Nevinson, Wyndham Lewis and David Bomberg among others) represents some of the finest modern British paintings of the century – as formally inventive as they were politically uncompromising.³² Nevertheless, the pessimism that inflects more general evaluations of the war continues to inform conclusions about its art. Despite the more nuanced interpretations of recent years, there remains an overwhelming sense that, to quote Bomberg, the conflict was ultimately ‘bad news for art’.³³ Art historians still largely believe that the years 1914 to 1918 destroyed more than they created; that they were inhospitable rather than conducive to serious cultural activity; and that, when plotting a larger story of British art, the war years are better seen as an end than a beginning.

Art historians, however, are by no means alone in evaluating the war’s impact on visual culture. Over the last three decades historians have become increasingly interested in the conflict’s artistic and intellectual consequences. Indeed, according to Jay Winter, cultural historians now represent ‘the pioneering sector of research

7 / Introduction

on the Great War'.³⁴ Winter himself, Annette Becker, Antoine Prost and many other cultural historians have repeatedly explored wartime painting and sculpture, but all of them have interpreted those art forms (along with other kinds of cultural output like graffiti, toys, postcards, photographs and public memorials) through the wider lens of '*culture de guerre*': what Winter and Prost have neatly defined as 'the mental furniture men and women draw on to make sense of their world at war'.³⁵ In this book I have endeavoured to incorporate some of the approaches adopted by cultural historians – their willingness to move between different forms and registers of cultural production and experience; their examination of art in light of its social and psychological functions – to advance a new argument about the relationship between British art and the First World War.

In this book I will argue that the war's artistic consequences, though initially disruptive, were ultimately, and enduringly, productive. Between 1914 and 1918 the conflict created an unusual set of social, political and cultural conditions. These conditions facilitated a change in the relationship between British society and its art. As 'total war' tightened its grip on all aspects of national life, the self-contained sphere that the art world had previously inhabited became unsustainable, and artists and their institutions found themselves operating within society as a whole. Though challenging at first, these new circumstances eventually brought art into a more symbiotic union with national life than it had perhaps ever experienced before. Under pressure to prove that it was not an enemy of the war effort, the art world self-mobilized to raise morale and recruit, to inform and entertain, to console and commemorate, and of course to fight. As the art world reached out to the country, the country in turn reached out to art. Britain's government, its press, its civic institutions and its public all began to use artworks precisely in order to deal with the unusual conditions of war. These developments produced in Britain a more social art as well as a more artistic society – and I believe that they informed the country's cultural agenda well into the 1920s.

In order to reach these broader cultural conclusions I will expand the parameters that have hitherto circumscribed art-historical accounts of the war. Art historians have traditionally focused their attentions on three areas: the experiences of young male soldier-artists; the government's propaganda campaign with its official war artists' schemes; and the fate of modernism after 1914. While all three areas are of undeniable importance, they are hardly representative of wider artistic developments. Not every artist went to the front, and very few were modernists or employed as official war artists. This book does not ignore those exceptional cases, but it does seek to place them in their appropriate context alongside the amateur watercolourists, popular illustrators, jobbing portraitists, provincial engravers, old Academicians and memorial sculptors who have

8 / British Art and the First World War, 1914–1924

hitherto been neglected but were just as much affected by the conflict. Moreover, all of them became extremely popular with wartime audiences; they are thus of crucial importance to comprehending how the country came to understand the war through art, and understand art through war.

Since I am interested more in art's social status and function than in its aesthetic qualities, my understanding of art for the purpose of this study is informed by sociological research. For some years, sociologists have interpreted art as a social activity. They have shown how it is produced by networks of individuals and organizations that collaborate to produce, exhibit, distribute, consume, commission and discuss objects that they – and we – understand as artworks. Sociologists and philosophers have called these conglomerations 'art worlds', defining them as 'institutions' that are just as real as any other feature of social life.³⁶ Using this definition, I will examine the constellation of people, organizations and practices that constituted the art world in wartime Britain. In addition to the obvious focus on artists and their work, I will discuss the experiences of collectors, dealers, curators, administrators, critics, publishers and scholars; I will analyse the activities of museums, galleries, artists' organizations, art schools and art-related businesses; and I will consistently relate both those individuals and those institutions to government policies, public discourses and private gestures in order to discern how the social position and reputation of the art world was altered by the conflict.

This book comprises six chapters that extend from the outbreak of war in 1914 to the opening of the British Empire Exhibition ten years later. Although I claim that art was ultimately invigorated by the war, my first two chapters describe how its initial experiences were far from promising. Chapter 1 focuses on the war's material consequences. Drawing on the financial records of auction houses, art collectors, art dealers, exhibiting societies and finally artists, it shows how the conflict produced a series of commercial disruptions that brought the art world very close to collapse. In the first six months of war the art market all but vanished; art institutions ceased to function; and artists were paralyzed by a shortage of material resources that were increasingly commandeered by the state. As a result, many artists changed careers and many arts organizations disappeared. Those that survived were left with little choice but to compete with the war effort and the rest of society for the same resources. I argue that this was not only futile; it created a situation in which artistic needs and national needs came to be at odds with each other.

This was just one part of the problem. In Chapter 2, I turn from war's quantifiable effects on the business of art to its less quantifiable, but equally potent, effects on the perceptions of art. Using all kinds of public and private discourses – from academic theories to popular novels, from official legislation to unofficial

9 / Introduction

gossip – I show how the war initially poisoned social perceptions of art and artists. No longer understood as a self-contained activity that could either be evaluated on its own merits or altogether ignored, art from 1914 was instead judged through the prism of the war effort. Artistic activities came to be considered trivial, unethical and unpatriotic distractions from the needs of the country, and artists were regularly identified as profiteers rather than patriots and as shirkers rather than soldiers. Moreover, as the final section of the chapter – which focuses on public fears of espionage – makes clear, artists were very often believed to be genuine enemies of the state. In every case, art was constructed as an unacceptable activity within a society at war.³⁷

It was, paradoxically, as a result of these almost unanswerable criticisms that the art world began to find an answer. Chapter 3 shows how from about 1915 many individuals and institutions within the art world began to rethink their social purpose in order to prove that they could in fact play a role in national life. I describe how critics, scholars and exhibiting societies reconceived paintings and sculptures as the embodiments of national identity; how the art market restructured itself around the acceptable face of charity while museums devoted themselves to propaganda and public information; and how artists gave up their peacetime careers, rallying the home front with posters and calibrating the front line with reconnaissance and camouflage. The art world, in short, transformed itself from a private peacetime institution into a public wartime institution. In the process, it not only secured its wartime survival; it may also have laid important foundations for a new and more central role in post-war Britain.

As the unique conditions of war encouraged the art world to reach out to the public, so they encouraged the public to reach out to art. In Chapters 4 and 5 I show how, somewhat surprisingly, the conflict created a set of voracious social demands for images. Chapter 4 describes how ‘war fever’ caused civilians to take an unprecedented interest in anything that represented the realities of the front line. Images were widely believed to be the most vivid, accessible and reliable ways of doing this. While photographs and films became the most prolific sources of these war pictures, the graphic arts were not left behind. Concentrating on the hugely popular output of the pictorial press, I demonstrate how artists produced images of war that were arguably more useful, more powerful and often more popular than those made by their photographic counterparts. In doing so, they secured vast new audiences for their work, and proved themselves to be so integral to the mediation of the war that from 1916 the government itself began to employ them as official war artists.

The nation’s sudden demand for images was not just driven by the desire to experience the war; it was also motivated by the need to escape and overcome

10 / British Art and the First World War, 1914–1924

the war. Like its precursor, Chapter 5 explores a wide and demotic range of visual material that was hugely popular with the wartime public but has since been largely neglected. It describes how the many pastoral landscapes exhibited at the Royal Academy and Royal Watercolour Society after 1914 were embraced by those who yearned for nostalgic escapism; how the commissioning of posthumous portraits helped grieving families cope with the premature deaths of their loved ones; and how a boom in amateur sketching – as well as being an early experiment with art therapy – enabled soldiers to come to terms with the traumas of the front line. In all of these cases, the war had not only brought entirely new audiences to art; it had lent their engagement with artworks a pressing emotional importance: not a matter of aesthetic curiosity but psychological survival.³⁸

If the unusual conditions of war had transformed the reputation, function and importance of art, my final chapter shows how those changes were very much sustained in the conflict's aftermath. Focusing on the five years between the Armistice of 1919 and the British Empire Exhibition of 1924, I survey the state of the arts in a nation that was itself attempting to rebuild. I explore artists' participation in the construction of memorials around the country, and the proliferation of largely forgotten artistic organizations like the Arts League of Service; I trace the development of increasingly sympathetic governmental attitudes towards art and art education; and I investigate an unusually reconciliatory mood within the art world itself, both between modern artists and traditional institutions and between fine art and popular design. Taken together, the art of the post-war period was productive, collaborative, civic-minded and socially engaged, and I conclude that this promising cultural landscape was one of the many long-term products of the First World War.

If this brief summary seems to paint a complex and even contradictory picture, that is only because the war's cultural consequences were themselves complex and contradictory. The conflict created obstacles and opportunities simultaneously; it demolished cultural reputations and audiences precisely as it built them. For this reason, this book should not be read as a strictly linear path through the period. It may be the case that the war's most acute artistic hardships (described in Chapters 1 and 2) were felt at its beginning; that the art world only started to mobilize (as described in Chapter 3) in its middle; and that war pictures and peace pictures (described in Chapters 4 and 5) were at their most socially influential towards its end. However, all of these themes overlapped and coexisted throughout the war years. One thing, however, seems clear: by 1924 British art was more conscious of society and British society more conscious of art than they had been a decade earlier.