



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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L. S. Lowry
Blitzed Site, detail
 1942
 The Lowry Collection

52-12 WORLD WAR 2 ART

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This lecture surveys British art in the Second World War through a generation of painters whose responses ranged from documentary witness to visionary transformation. L S Lowry, Paul Nash, John Piper, Eric Ravilious, Evelyn Dunbar, and Graham Sutherland each brought a distinct sensibility to a nation under bombardment. We will trace how official commissions, modernist inheritance, and personal conviction shaped work that remains among the most searching art Britain has ever produced.

Notes

- The 1930s saw the devastating **Great Depression**, the **National Hunger March** of 1932, **Adolf Hitler** rise to power in 1933, the year that Leo Szilard conceived of the **nuclear chain reaction** and patented the idea of the **nuclear reactor**, Mao Zedong's **Long March** from 1934 to 1935, the **Dust Bowl** in America from 1934 onwards, the **abdication** of Edward VIII in 1936, **Ireland** becoming a republic in 1937, Stalin's **Great Purge** in the Soviet Union from 1936 to 1938, the **Spanish Civil War** from 1936 to 1939 and the beginning of **World War II** on 1 September 1939.

Historic Events of the 1920 and 30s

- **1920s.** The 1920s saw widespread unemployment in the UK, the Irish Free State in 1921, hyperinflation in Germany, the first publication of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in 1925, the founding of the BBC in 1920 and the first public demonstration of television in 1932, the first full-length talking

movie was *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, the first solo flight across the Atlantic by Charles Lindbergh in 1927, all women over 21 in the UK get the vote in 1928, the discovery of penicillin by Alexander Fleming in 1928 and the beginning of the Great Depression across the world. In art it was the start of Art Deco with its bold colours, geometric shapes and linear elements. Surrealism captured the imagination of writers and artists with its dream-like expressionism.

- **Great Depression.** At the beginning of the 1930s Great Britain was still recovering from the effects of the First World War when the Great Depression hit. This started with **Black Tuesday**, 29 October 1929, the **Wall Street Crash**, which was caused by a massive over investment in shares by naïve investors which drove up share prices followed by over production in industry which resulted in poor sales and a stock price collapse fuelled by massive selling. This was combined with an over production of food driven by new agricultural efficiencies and the inevitable fall in food prices followed by bankrupt farmers defaulting on their loans causing many small banks to go bust.
- The US **Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act** of 1930 was designed to protect American jobs. It raised tariffs of up to 60% on 20,000 types of imported goods. It initially seemed to work as imports dropped 66% and industrial production increased sharply but soon exports dropped 61% as other countries retaliated and America's gross national product (GNP) nearly halved (it dropped 46%) in three years. World trade dropped 33% and US unemployment rose from 8% in 1930 to 25% in 1933. In 1945 the International Trade organization was created to make sure it could never happen again.
- The effects on the **northern industrial areas** of Britain were **immediate and devastating**, as **demand** for traditional industrial products **collapsed**. By the end of 1930 **unemployment** had more than doubled **from 1 million to 2.5 million** (20% of the insured workforce), and exports had fallen in value by 50%. In 1933, 30% of Glaswegians were unemployed due to the severe decline in heavy industry. In some towns and cities in the north east, **unemployment reached as high as 70%** as shipbuilding fell 90%. The **National Hunger March** of September–October **1932** was the largest of a series of hunger marches in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. About **200,000 unemployed men** were sent to the **work camps**, which continued in operation until 1939. In the **less industrial Midlands** and **Southern England**,

the effects were **short-lived** and the later 1930s were a **prosperous time**. Growth in modern manufacture of electrical goods and a boom in the motor car industry was helped by a growing southern population and an expanding middle class. Agriculture also saw a boom during this period.

- In America the **Dust Bowl** devastated agriculture in the Mid-West. It was caused by drought combined with poor farming practices. Deep ploughing and the drought turned the soil to dust which blew away, turning the sky black and removing the fertile top soil. Poor farming practices continued until the 1950s possibly because of the lack of banking credit needed to enable the farmers to switch from crops and wheat to animals and hay.
- **Adolf Hitler** (1889-1945) gained popular support by attacking the Treaty of Versailles and promoting anti-Semitism and anti-communism with charismatic speeches and Nazi propaganda. By 1933, the **Nazi Party** was the **largest elected party** in the German Reichstag, which led to Hitler's appointment as **Chancellor on 30 January 1933**. Following fresh elections won by his coalition, the Reichstag passed the **Enabling Act**, which began the process of transforming the Weimar Republic into Nazi Germany, a one-party dictatorship based on the totalitarian and autocratic ideology of National Socialism.
- The concept of a **nuclear chain reaction** was reportedly first hypothesized by Hungarian scientist Leó Szilárd on September 12, 1933. He patented the idea of a **nuclear reactor** with Enrico Fermi, and in late 1939 wrote the letter for Albert Einstein's signature that resulted in the Manhattan Project that built the **atomic bomb**.
- **The Long March** was a strategic retreat across the worst terrain in China from Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist Party Army. It was a series of marches over a period of 370 days that covered 5,600 miles. Only one tenth of the force completed the march. The march was a significant episode in the history of the Chinese Communist Party and established the reputation and leadership of Mao Zedong.
- **Edward VIII** became king on 20 January 1936 following the death of George V. A few months later a constitutional crisis arose when he proposed to marry **Wallis Simpson**, an American socialite who was divorced from her first husband and was pursuing a divorce of her second. The marriage was opposed by the governments of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth for religious, legal, political and moral reasons. As British monarch, Edward was the nominal head of the Church of England, which did not then allow divorced people to remarry in church if their ex-spouses were still alive. For this reason, it was widely believed that Edward

could not marry Simpson and remain on the throne. On 11 December 1936 he abdicated becoming one of the shortest-reigning monarchs in British history.

- In 1921 the **Anglo-Irish Treaty** gave Ireland complete independence and created Northern Ireland but it included an oath of allegiance to the King. This led to the **Irish Civil War** which ended in 1923. When Éamon de Valera achieved power he negotiated away the oath and created a new constitution in 1937. The **Republic of Ireland** was not officially declared until 1949.
- The **Spanish Civil War** was fought between the Republicans, who were loyal to the democratic, left-leaning Second Spanish Republic, and the Nationalists, a Falangist (a type of Roman Catholic fascism) group led by General Francisco Franco. Although often portrayed as a struggle between democracy and fascism, some historians consider it more accurately described as a struggle between leftist revolution and rightist counterrevolution. Ultimately, the Nationalists won, and Franco then ruled Spain for the next 36 years, from April 1939 until his death in November 1975. The war resulted in the deaths of 500,000 people including 100,000 executed by General Franco after the war.

1930s

The Wall Street Crash, Smoot-Hawley and the Great Depression

The National Hunger March of 1932 and Jarrow March of 1936

Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933

Nuclear chain reaction discovered

Mao Zedong's Long March from 1934 to 1935

The Dust Bowl in America from 1934 onwards

The abdication of Edward VIII in 1936

Ireland became a republic in 1937

Stalin's Great Purge in the Soviet Union from 1936 to 1938

The Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939

World War II started on 1 September 1939

Artists Covered

1. Laurence Stephen Lowry (1887–1976)
2. Paul Nash (1889-1946)
3. Ben Nicholson (1894–1982)
4. John Armstrong (1893-1973)
5. John Piper (1903–1992)
6. Eric Ravilious (1903-1942)
7. Graham Sutherland (1903-1980)
8. Evelyn Dunbar (1906–1960)

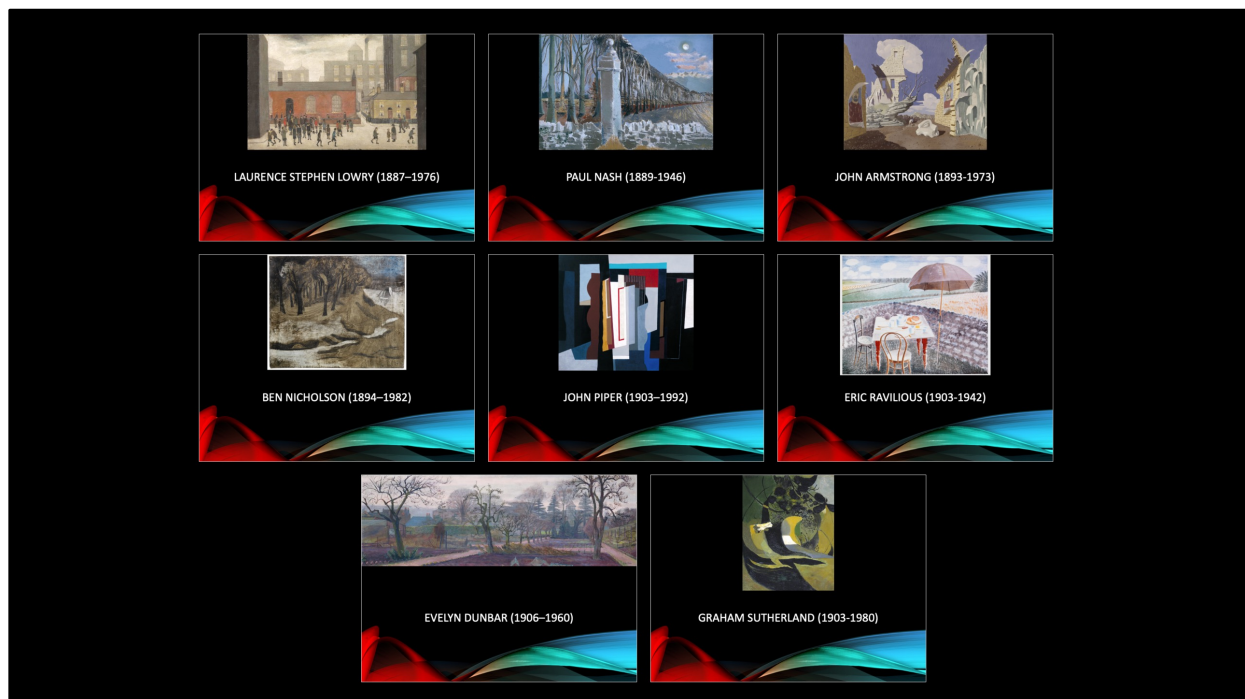
The War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC)

- Under the guidance of the National Gallery Director Kenneth Clark, The War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC) was established in 1939. Chaired by Clark and administered by the Government Ministry of Information and The British War Advisory Scheme, the group met monthly to coordinate the project, including selecting the artists, their pay and commissions. Each artist's primary purpose was to create imagery for propaganda, but it was widely understood that their work was more than just illustrating mass produced posters and pamphlets. By employing so many of the country's most talented artists, the committee were not only allowing the creation of an important and lasting record of the atrocities faced at home and on the front line, but also trying to preserve the lives and talents of the artists themselves for future generations. By 1945 the collection had amassed more than 5570 works.

World War II Artists (alphabetically)

- Edward Ardizzone CBE RA, 1900–1979
- Edward Bawden RA, 1903–1989
- Stephen Bone 1904–1958
- David Bomberg 1890–1957
- Henry Carr RA, 1894–1970
- Leslie Cole, 1910–1976
- Charles Cundall, 1890–1971
- Evelyn Mary Dunbar
- Simon Elwes, 1902–1975

- Barnett Freedman, 1901-1958
- Ethel Gabain, 1882-1950
- Charles Ginner, 1878-1952
- Duncan Grant, 1885-1978
- Thomas Hennell, 1903-1945
- Eliot Hodgkin, 1905-1987
- Eric Kennington, RA, 1888-1960
- Mary Kessell, 1914-1977
- Laura Knight DBE RA, 1877-1970
- L.S. Lowry, 1887-1976
- Henry Moore, 1898-1986
- James Morris, 1908-1989)
- Paul Nash, 1889-1946.
- Cuthbert Orde, 1888-1968
- Mervyn Peake, 1911-1968
- John Piper, 1903-1992
- Roland Vivian Pitchforth, 1895-1982
- Eric Ravilious, 1903-1942
- Albert Richards, 1919-1945
- Leonard Rosoman RA, 1913-2012
- William Rothenstein, 1872-1945
- Alan Sorrell, 1904-1974
- Ruskin Spear RA, 1911-1990
- Stanley Spencer RA, 1891-1959
- Graham Sutherland OM, 1903-1980
- Carel Weight CBE RA, 1908-1997
- Frank Wootton, 1914-1998
- Doris Zinkeisen, 1898-1991
- Anna Zinkeisen, 1901-1976



I begin with **L S Lowry** a deliberate counterpoint — a figure who remained almost entirely outside the Continental currents reshaping British art in the 1930s, yet produced a body of work instantly recognisable as its own kind of vision.

L. S. Lowry (1887–1976) was not an official war artist, but his industrial Manchester and Salford scenes of blitzed streets and factories at war (e.g. depictions of bomb damage and munitions workers) extended his lifelong subject of northern industrial life into the wartime context.

Paul Nash (1889–1946) was an official war artist in both world wars, whose *Totes Meer* (1940–41), a landscape of wrecked German aircraft rendered as a frozen sea, remains the defining Surrealist-inflected image of the Battle of Britain.

John Armstrong (1893–1973) a Surrealist-influenced painter who worked as an official war artist for the Ministry of Information from 1940, producing tempera paintings of bomb-damaged London and civil defence subjects (notably fire and rescue services) rendered in his characteristically stylised, hard-edged manner.

John Piper (1903–1992) was the official war artist commissioned to record bomb damage, best known for his brooding, Romantic depictions of the Blitzed ruins of Coventry Cathedral and other bombed churches.

Eric Ravilious (1903–1942) another official war artist whose crisp, restrained watercolours of ships, submarines and airfields captured the machinery of

war, cut short when he was lost in 1942 while accompanying an RAF air-sea rescue flight off Iceland.

Evelyn Dunbar (1906–1960) was one of very few women given a full-time official war artist contract, chiefly documenting the Women's Land Army and other women's wartime labour.

And finally **Graham Sutherland** (1903–1980) was an official war artist who painted bomb-damaged buildings and industrial subjects such as tin mines and steel foundries, developing the organic, distorted forms that carried into his postwar religious and portrait work.



Laurence Stephen Lowry (1887–1976)
Coming Out of School
 1927
 34.7 x 53.9 cm
 Tate, London

Laurence Stephen Lowry (1887–1976), *Coming Out of School*, 1927, 34.7 x 53.9 cm, Tate, London

What makes Lowry's work so compelling is precisely the tension **John Rothenstein** identified when he visited Lowry's first London solo exhibition in **1939**. Rothenstein, then Director of the **Tate Gallery**, wrote that he stood marvelling at "the accuracy of the mirror that this to me unknown painter had held up to the bleakness, the obsolete shabbiness, the grimy fogboundness, the grimness of northern industrial England." It is a remarkable response, and what Rothenstein was registering was not mere documentary realism but something far stranger — images that feel simultaneously specific and archetypal. This quality comes directly from Lowry's method. His urban scenes are rarely depictions of identifiable places. They are built from recollection, from decades of walking Lancashire streets as a rent collector, accumulating impressions that he then reassembled imaginatively in the studio. He knew **French Impressionism** well — he had encountered it at **Manchester School of Art** from 1905 — and understood exactly how it had transformed the painting of modern city life. He admired the **Pre-Raphaelites**, particularly **Ford Madox Brown** and **Rossetti**. He absorbed all of this and then set it aside, arriving at his own flattened, ashen, unmistakable vision of the industrial north — a vision entirely on his own terms.

Notes

Tate website: 'Like many of Lowry's pictures this is not a depiction of a particular place, but is based on recollections of a school seen in Lancashire. Lowry's combination of observation and imaginative power often produced images which capture a deeply felt experience of place, with which others could identify. For example, in 1939 John Rothenstein, then Director of the Tate Gallery, visited Lowry's first solo exhibition in London and later wrote: 'I stood in the gallery marvelling at the accuracy of the mirror that this to me unknown painter had held up to the bleakness, the obsolete shabbiness, the grimy fogboundness, the grimness of northern industrial England.' This work was then purchased by the Trustees.'

Lowry was well aware of French Impressionism and how it had changed the way in which the modern city and landscapes were painted. He knew the current trends in modern art and admired the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly Ford Madox Brown and Rossetti. Lowry found a distinctive way to paint the northern city and he made it his own.

Notes

Laurence Stephen Lowry (1887-1976) lived in Pendlebury, Lancashire, from the age of 22 and the area around was the subject of many of his paintings for more than 40 years. He painted mysterious unpopulated landscapes, urban landscapes populated by 'matchstick people', brooding portraits and the unpublished 'marionette' works that were only found after his death. His father was a clerk and a 'cold fish' and his mother was a talented pianist but in poor health. She wanted a daughter rather than a 'clumsy boy' and she was controlling and intolerant of failure. He had an unhappy childhood and his parents never appreciated his artistic talent. He made few friends at school and showed little academic aptitude. After school he started work as a rent collector and spent his evenings learning to draw and in 1905 he attended Manchester School of Art where he came into contact with French Impressionism. Between 1915 and 1925 he studied at the Royal Technical Institute, Salford.

Bio:Lowry

Lowry was born in **Pendlebury, Lancashire**, in 1887, into a household he described in bleak terms: a cold, distant father and a mother whose

disappointment in life seemed to settle on everyone around her. He attended the **Manchester School of Art** and the **Salford Royal Technical College**, fitting classes around a day job as a rent collector — work he kept for decades and which took him daily through the industrial terraces he would paint. His mother's long illness confined his studio time to after ten at night; she died in **1939**, the same year war broke out. During the war he served as a **volunteer fire warden** and was appointed a **war artist**. His domestic life was eccentric: a suitcase permanently by the front door, a house full of clocks, and in later years a habit of simply walking out on uninvited callers. He was sociable with chosen friends but kept strangers at arm's length — a man who, like his paintings, rewards attention but resists easy approach.



L. S. Lowry (1887-1976)
Blitzed Site
 1942
 41 x 51 cm
 The Lowry Collection, Salford

L. S. Lowry (1887-1976), *Blitzed Site*, 1942, 41 x 51 cm, The Lowry Collection, Salford

That existential bleakness found its sharpest real-world parallel during the **Second World War**, when Lowry served as a volunteer fire-watcher, typically stationed on the roof of a Manchester department store. He recalled being "first down in the morning to sketch the blitzed buildings before the smoke and grime had cleared" — the artist as witness, notebook already open in the ruins. The painting on this slide carries a hidden history of its own: **X-ray examination** has revealed it is painted directly over one of his art school studies, the old work pressed into service beneath the new. His mother **Elizabeth** had died in **1939**, and the loss hit him hard. He fell into depression, neglected the house so badly the landlord repossessed it, and retreated into an increasingly solitary existence. He bought another house he openly disliked but never left — he lived there until his death. The wartime years deepened that isolation, yet they also produced some of his most concentrated work. By **1943** the **War Artists' Advisory Committee** had recognised him as an official war artist — an acknowledgement that the man who had spent decades painting industrial Manchester was uniquely equipped to record a city under assault.

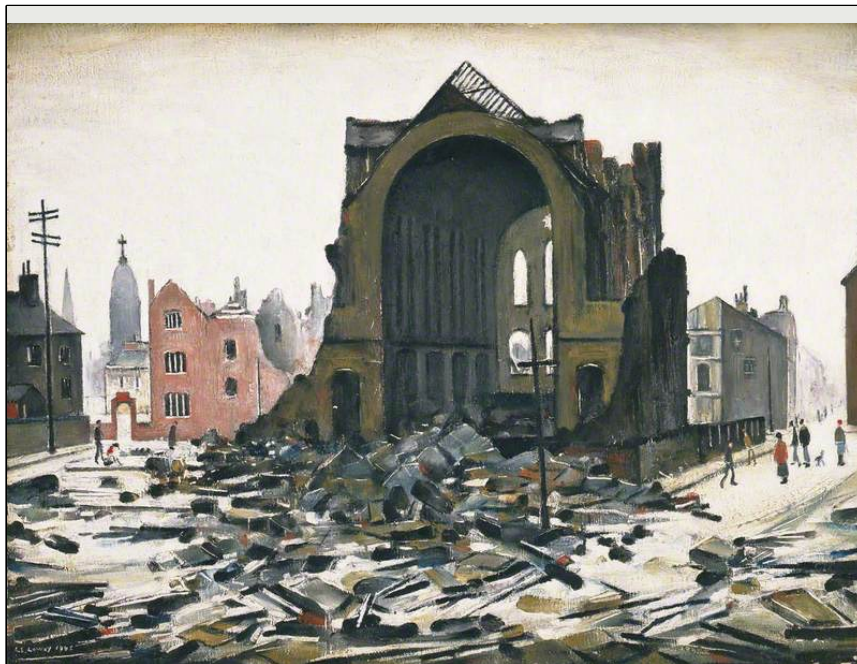
Notes

During the Second World War Lowry worked as a fire-watcher in Manchester, usually stationed on the roof of a city centre department store. He recalled being 'first down in the morning to sketch the blitzed buildings before the smoke and grime had cleared.'

X-ray examination has shown that this picture is painted over one of Lowry's art school studies.

He had to care for his mother as she became more ill and painted between 10pm and 2am after she had fallen asleep. She died in 1939 and during the war he was a volunteer fire fighter and he became an official war artist in 1943. He became depressed after his mother's death and neglected the house to such an extent that the landlord repossessed it. However, he had money and bought another house which although he found it ugly and uncomfortable he remained in it until his death 30 years later. In 1962 became a Royal Academician aged 74.

He went on holiday in the Seaburn Hotel in Sunderland and sketched everywhere. When he had no other material he sketched on serviettes which he gave to young people around him. These serviette sketches are now worth thousands of pounds. He collected amusing stories whether true or not and often set out to mischievously deceive. He had a collection of clocks in his living room all set to different times. He had many long-lasting friendships and made friends throughout his life. As his celebrity grew he disliked being approached by strangers, particularly at home and there is a story that he kept a suitcase by the front door so that he could make an excuse to leave as soon as anyone arrived. He discontinued this practice when one young man offered to take him to the station and he had to buy a ticket to the next station to get rid of him.



L. S. Lowry (1887–1976)
St Augustine's Church
 1945
 46 x 61.3 cm
 Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester

L. S. Lowry (1887–1976), *St Augustine's Church*, 1945, 46 x 61.3 cm, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester

Purchased directly by the **War Artists' Advisory Committee**, this close-up view of **St Augustine's Church, Manchester** shows what Lowry documented on those early-morning fire-watching descents: a shell of walls, a street heaped with rubble, a handful of figures standing at the edge of the wreckage. The composition gives you almost no sky, no escape — just the fact of destruction pressed close. Lowry consistently deflected any elevated reading of what he was doing. "I am not an artist," he said flatly. "I am a man who paints." Yet his taste was more complex than that self-deprecation suggested. He admired **René Magritte** and **Lucian Freud**, collected drawings by **Dante Gabriel Rossetti**, whom he called his chief inspiration, and attended the **Royal Ballet** regularly. He simply could not find a way into **Francis Bacon** — "I don't understand it," he admitted — which is revealing in itself, given how much darkness the two men shared. He rejected five honours, including a knighthood, making him the record-holder for declined British distinctions. He never married, lived alone, and died in **1976** aged eighty-eight. A major **Tate retrospective** followed in **2013**, and his first solo exhibition outside the United Kingdom opened in **China** in **2014** — the man who painted Manchester, finally travelling.

Notes

A close-up view of St Augustine's Church in Manchester, destroyed by air raid bombing. Only the shell remains, which is surrounded by a pile of rubble. A few figures stand in the street to the right, and there are more bombed buildings in the background to the left. Lowry frequently represented scenes of destruction in Britain, and this work was purchased by the War Artists' Advisory Committee.

He claimed he was a simple man who could not appreciate modern art but he admired René Magritte and Lucian Freud, although he admitted that he "didn't understand" Francis Bacon's work. When he became more wealthy he acquired paintings and drawings by Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti who he described as his chief inspiration.

Lowry was a shy and secretive artist who remained unmarried until his death, at the age of 88, Lowry once admitted that he had "never had a woman". He was a keen ballet-goer who regularly attended performances by the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden and in his home city of Manchester. He rejected five honours in his life including a knighthood and so he holds the record for the most rejected British honours. There was a major retrospective at the Tate in 2013 and his first solo exhibition outside the UK in China in 2014.

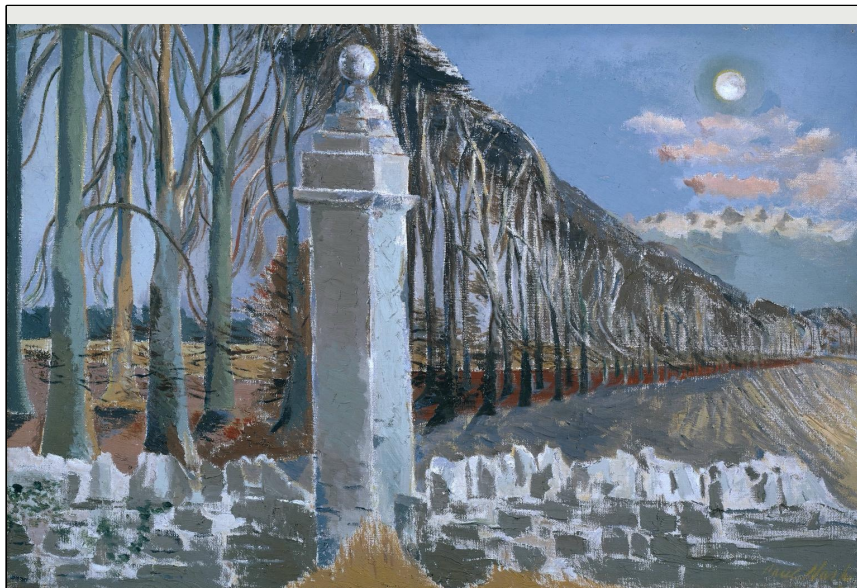
Quotations:

"I wanted to paint myself into what absorbed me ... Natural figures would have broken the spell of it, so I made my figures half unreal."

"You don't need brains to be a painter, just feelings."

"I am not an artist. I am a man who paints."

"This art is a terrible business."



Paul Nash (1889-1946)
Pillar and Moon
 1932-42
 50.8 x 76.2 cm
 Tate

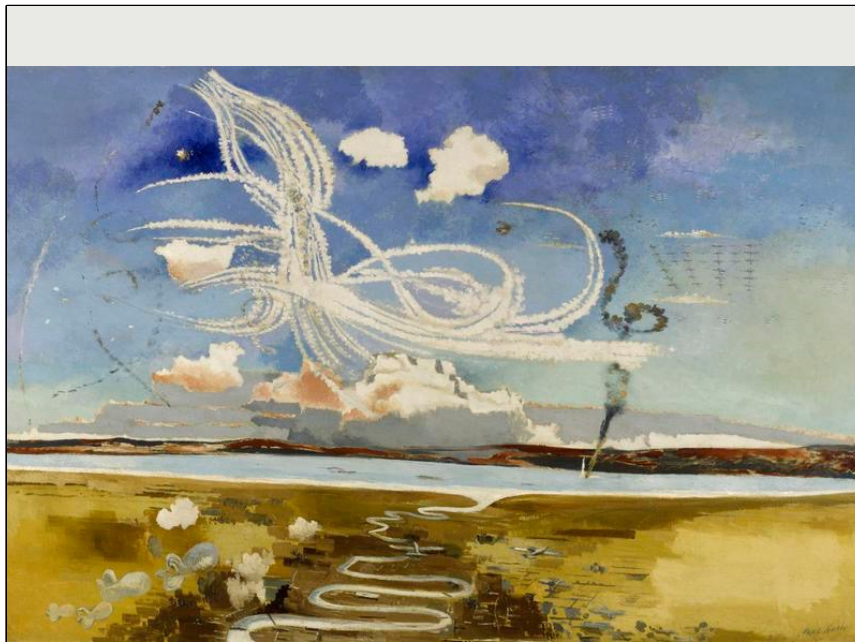
Paul Nash (1889-1946), *Pillar and Moon*, 1932-42, 50.8 x 76.2 cm, Tate

From one war artist who resisted interpretation to another who insisted on it — **Paul Nash** brought to both World Wars a fury that was also a philosophy. Nash was born in **1889** and enrolled at the **Slade School of Fine Art** in 1910, the year his mother died. The loss shadowed him, and the landscape became a kind of substitute — not decorative scenery but a living, spiritual presence. **Samuel Palmer's** visionary pastoral was an early touchstone, and **Wittenham Clumps**, the two ancient tree-crowned hills in Oxfordshire, haunted Nash from his first paintings of them to his final ones, made as he was dying. In the First World War he fell into a trench before seeing action, and while he convalesced in England, most of his unit were killed. The guilt and rage produced some of the starkest landscapes of that conflict. "I am no longer an artist," he wrote. "I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever." In the interwar years he helped found **Unit One** in **1933**, championing British modernism. By the Second World War he was a salaried artist attached to the **Royal Air Force** — who proved uncomfortable with his vision — and died of asthma in **1946**, in a house with a view of Wittenham Clumps.

Notes

Bio:Nash

Paul Nash was the son of a barrister who moved from Earls Court to Iwer Heath when he was 13. His mother died when he was 21, the year he enrolled at the Slade. He was influenced by Samuel Palmer who became very influential in the 1930s. In WWI he enlisted and had a quiet war until 1917 when he fell in a trench. When he was in England recuperating most of his unit died. He was influenced by the Vorticists and became a war artist. He was angry and disillusioned by the way the war had destroyed the landscape as for him the land and trees had a mystical and magical quality. Wittenham Clumps, two tree-topped hills, were an important inspiration for him at the beginning and end of his life. In the 1920s he was a well regarded book illustrator and textile designer. He became a prolific photographer and in 1929 his father died and he moved to Rye. He then moved to London and then Swanage and wrote the Shell Guide to Dorset. In the 1930s he co-founded Unit One and became a pioneer of modernism. In WWII he was a salaried war artist assigned to the Royal Air Force but they did not approve of his choice of subjects. He died of asthma in 1946 in a house overlooking Wittenham Clumps.



Paul Nash (1892-1946)
Battle of Britain
 1941
 Imperial War Museums

Paul Nash (1892-1946), *Battle of Britain*, 1941, Imperial War Museums

That reorientation Nash achieved through Unit One — fusing English landscape with modernist form — became the very tool the **War Artists' Advisory Committee** deployed when war came again. In **1940**, Nash was appointed to a full-time salaried post attached to the **Royal Air Force** and the **Air Ministry**. The image on this slide — an abstracted aerial view of a wide, flat river estuary, its sky fractured by contrails and smoke plumes, aircraft moving in tight formation — shows immediately why his appointment was contentious. The **Air Ministry** representative on the committee found Nash's modernist approach deeply uncomfortable. The RAF wanted something straightforwardly legible: portraits of heroic pilots and aircrew, images that served recruitment and morale in the most conventional sense. Nash had no interest in that. He had spent the **1930s** arguing, alongside **Herbert Read** and the Unit One circle, that British art had to stop being provincial — and he was not about to retreat into academic portraiture at the moment history demanded the most from him. What the RAF saw as an obstacle was, for Nash, the only honest response to industrialised aerial warfare: not the human face, but the inhuman sky.

Notes

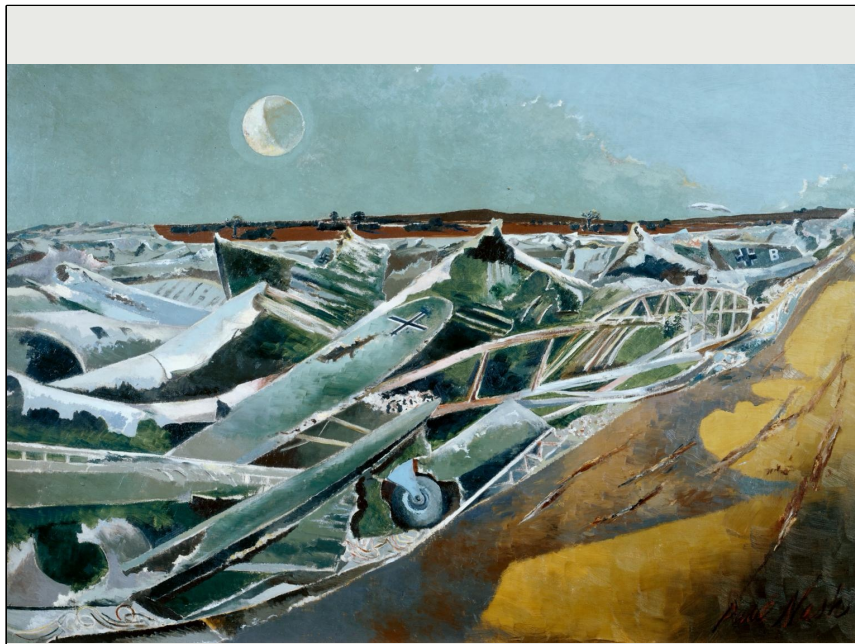
An abstracted aerial view of a wide flat landscape including the mouth of a

river. Above the sky is full of aircraft contrails and smoke plumes, while to the upper right aircraft are flying in formation.

At the start of World War Two Nash was appointed by the War Artists' Advisory Committee to a full-time salaried war artist post attached to the Royal Air Force and the Air Ministry. Nash was unpopular with the Air Ministry representative on the WAAC committee, partly because of the modernist nature of his work and partly because the RAF wanted the WAAC artists to concentrate on producing portraits of their pilots and aircrew.

References

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Nash_\(artist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Nash_(artist))



Paul Nash (1889-1946)
Totes Meer (Dead Sea)
 1940-41
 101.6 x 152.4 cm
 Tate

Paul Nash (1889-1946), *Totes Meer (Dead Sea)*, 1940-41, 101.6 x 152.4 cm, Tate

Before **Battle of Germany** came the work that established Nash's distinctive visual logic for aerial warfare — **Totes Meer**, completed in **1941**. The title translates literally as Dead Sea, and the conceit is exact: Nash presents the wreckage of aircraft shot down during the **Battle of Britain** as a frozen ocean of twisted metal. The site was a real one — a dump at **Cowley, near Oxford** — and Nash visited it repeatedly, working from photographs he took himself. In reality the wreckage included both British and German machines, but Nash chose to render them all as Luftwaffe aircraft, a deliberate propagandist decision that transforms the painting into a vision of German defeat. What struck him on those visits was the absolute stillness. He wrote that it looked to him like a sea that was completely dead: "Nothing moves, it is not water or even ice, it is something static and dead." That quality of suspended, petrified time is precisely what separates **Totes Meer** from straightforward documentary — the wreckage does not smoulder or collapse, it simply lies there, as permanent and silent as a geological formation. Against this stillness, a single **white owl** sweeps low across the composition. It is the only living presence, and its appearance tips the image from reportage into elegy.

Notes

Totes Meer is German for 'Dead Sea' and Nash is presenting planes shot down during the Battle of Britain as a sea of dead planes. The area contained British and German planes but Nash has made all the destroyed planes German for propaganda reasons. He worked from photographs he took on the site. He said it looked to him like a sea that was completely dead, 'nothing moves, it is not water or even ice, it is something static and dead'. The only creature is the white owl swooping low over the dead scene.



John Armstrong (1893-1973)
Pro Patria
 1938
 Imperial War Museums

John Armstrong (1893-1973)

That owl in Nash's elegy for the Luftwaffe makes a useful bridge — both men found in devastation something close to the visionary. **John Armstrong** arrived at war art by an equally circuitous route. Born in **Hastings** in **1893**, the son of a clergyman, Armstrong read law at Oxford before abandoning it entirely for the life of a working artist. By the time he joined **Unit One** in **1933** — alongside Nash himself — he had already built a solid reputation as a theatre designer and commercial artist, producing celebrated posters for **Shell** and the **Royal Mail**. That background in design gave his painting a quality of deliberate, almost architectural arrangement that distinguished it from more spontaneous contemporaries. When Armstrong received his **Official War Artist** appointment he was tasked with recording **bomb damage** across Britain, and his responses were more stylised than documentary. Some critics found this unsatisfying — too composed in the face of raw destruction. Armstrong, characteristically, was untroubled by the charge; his allegiance was to form, not to reportage. The painting on screen now is **Pro Patria**, and its title does all the polemical work Armstrong refused to do through sentiment. The phrase comes from **Horace** — **dulce et decorum est pro patria mori**, it is sweet and proper to die for one's country — and Armstrong would have seen it plastered across Fascist Italy when he visited in **1937**, Mussolini's regime having conscripted it into propaganda. **Wilfred Owen** had

already called it "the old lie" in his First World War poem, and the painting extends that argument through form rather than words. After the war his imagination moved toward nuclear catastrophe, producing some of his most sombre and unnerving imagery. He continued working until **Parkinson's disease** made it impossible, and he died in **1973**.

Notes

Bio:Armstrong

John Armstrong was born in Hastings to a clergyman father and studied law at Oxford but switched career. He served with distinction in WWI and built a career as a theatre designer before joining Unit One in 1933. He designed posters for Shell and Royal Mail. In WWII he was appointed as a war artist and recorded bomb damage but his work was criticised by some as too superficial. After the war he became well known for his painting of the effects of nuclear war. He continued to paint until his death from Parkinson's disease in 1973.

Notes

John Rutherford Armstrong (1893–1973) was a British artist and muralist who also designed for film and theatre productions, but is most notable for the Surrealist paintings he produced.

He was born in Hastings and his father was a clergyman who had him educated at St Paul's School, London. He then studied law at St John's College, Oxford but switched to art. He served with distinction in the Royal Field Artillery in Salonika (now the Greek port of Thessaloniki). He slowly built a career as a theatre designer and room designer. Armstrong held his first solo exhibition in 1928 at the Leicester Galleries in London. In 1933 he joined Unit One and displayed a set of semi-abstract paintings at their one, extended, exhibition. There was no strong aesthetic or style that brought together British artists in the 1930s and groups, such as Unit One, quickly dispersed as the members pursued their individual visions.

Armstrong is sometimes described as a Surrealist and this painting invokes the images of dreams. The melancholy mood is reminiscent of de Chirico's townscapes. However, this is misleading as Armstrong prized his independence and did not like to be categorized. He was a master designer and, like Stanley Spencer, could plan a complete work in advance and then proceed with painting it in detail from top left to bottom right.

It is a reworking of Piero della Francesca's *The Baptism of Christ* with a large storm cloud suggesting a forthcoming war instead of the dove of peace with torn posters and the ruins of civilization below. The trees are blasted and the earth rocky and barren. A tiny figure in the middle distance is a pathetic echo of Christ. The colours are influenced by Francesca and remained an inspiration throughout his life. It is not a work of overt propaganda and is therefore timeless in its appeal. It is one of Armstrong's early masterpieces.

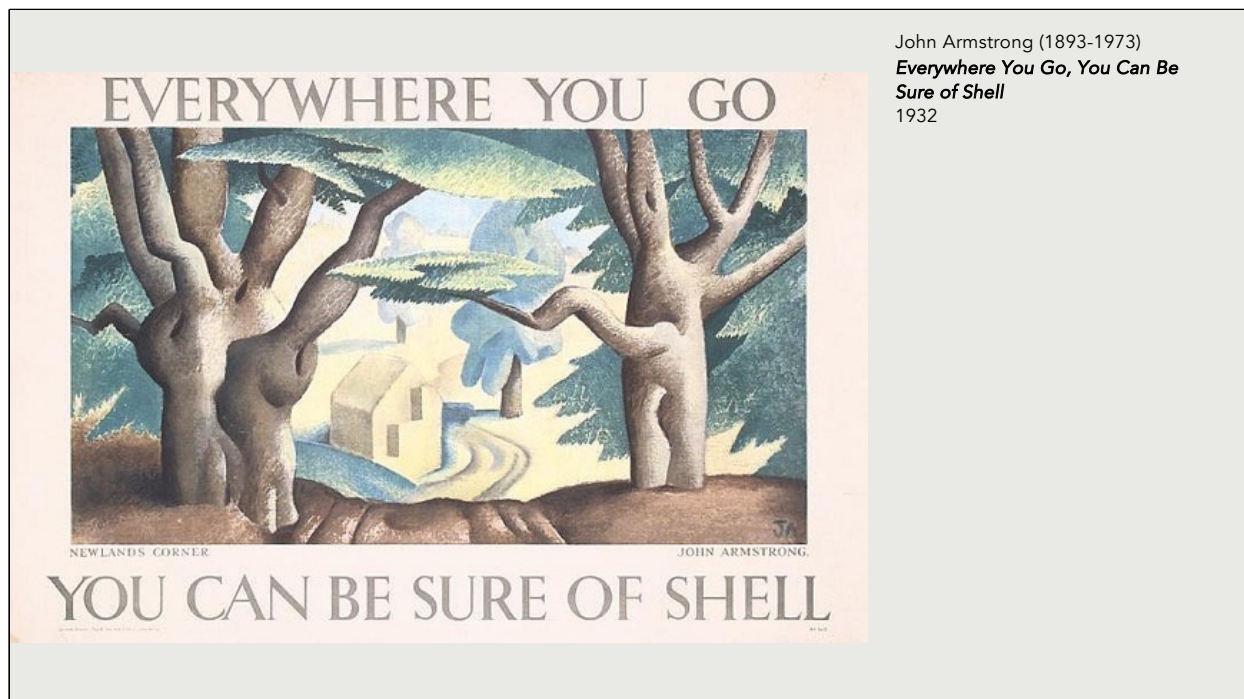
When Armstrong visited Italy in 1937 he found 'Pro Patria' plastered everywhere as propaganda for Mussolini. The title means 'for one's country' and is from 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' is a line from the Roman lyrical poet Horace's *Odes* (III.2.13). The line can be translated as: "It is sweet and proper to die for one's country." The line was used by Wilfred Owen in his satirical anti-war poem 'Dulce Et Decorum Est'. In the poem he described the line from Horace as 'the old lie'. In a school essay in 1915 Bertold Brecht called the line from Horace 'cheap propaganda' and pointed out that 'It is sweeter and more fitting to live for one's country.'

If we separate artists into two camps, the Romantic and the Classical, and if the Romantic prioritizes the representation of the artist's feelings and emotions over the art and the Classical artist subordinates themselves to their art, regarding themselves as a conduit between the viewer and some greater truth or order, then Armstrong was a Classical artist.

References

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Armstrong_\(artist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Armstrong_(artist))

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/851>



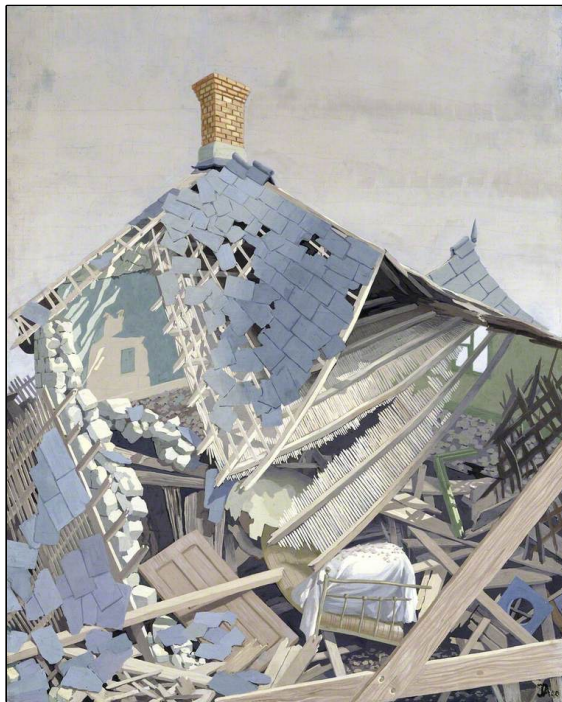
John Armstrong (1893-1973), *Everywhere You Go, You Can Be Sure of Shell*, 1932

That methodical, controlling intelligence carried Armstrong across two careers simultaneously — and that dual life is worth pausing on. Through the **1930s** he maintained a prolific commercial practice alongside his fine art, producing posters for **Shell** that placed him in distinguished company: **Paul Nash**, **Edward McKnight Kauffer**, and **Graham Sutherland** all contributed to the same campaign. Shell's art director **Jack Beddington** had an unusually sharp eye, and the commissions he placed amounted to a quiet patronage system for modernist artists who might otherwise have struggled for income. Armstrong also produced a poster for the **Royal Mail** in **1935**, bringing that same compositional rigour to a public audience in a completely different register. What's striking is how little his commercial discipline contaminated his personal vision — if anything, it sharpened it. The **1938** exhibition that included **Dreaming Head** showed Armstrong working in a distinctly **Surrealist** idiom, but rooted in English landscape rather than Continental dreamspace. These are not Dalí's melting watches; the strangeness grows out of something recognisably local. **Pro Patria** belongs to that same exhibition year, which means Armstrong was holding both registers — the eerily quiet surrealism of **Dreaming Head** and the political cold fury of the Spanish Civil War painting — in his mind at exactly the same moment.

Notes

Throughout the 1930s Armstrong continued to work as a designer as he also continued to develop his art. He produced a number of remarkable posters for Shell (as did other artists). Armstrong also produced a 1935 poster for the Royal Mail.

In 1938 Armstrong held an exhibition which featured Surrealist works set in English landscapes such as Dreaming Head. Pro Patria, also from 1938, is Armstrong's comment on the Spanish Civil War.



John Armstrong (1893–1973)
A Farm in Wales
 1940
 64.6 x 51 cm
 National Museum Wales, Cardiff

John Armstrong (1893–1973), *A Farm in Wales*, 1940, 64.6 x 51 cm, National Museum Wales, Cardiff

The surrealist calm of **Dreaming Head** and the political anger of **Pro Patria** had prepared Armstrong, in a way, for exactly what came next. When bombing brought destruction into the British countryside, he had already spent years finding meaning in decay and ruin. Armstrong worked as an official war artist on short contracts for the **War Artists' Advisory Committee**, producing paintings including **The Elms** and **A Farm in Wales** that recorded bomb damage to churches, cottages, and farmsteads. This particular bombed farmhouse near **Aberthaw** in South Wales, close to the **RAF station at St Athan**, was painted by **Graham Sutherland** in the same year, **1940**. That overlap was almost certainly deliberate policy rather than coincidence. The **War Artists' Advisory Committee** understood the propaganda urgency of showing bombing falling on private homes and farms, not just military installations — a pointed argument at a moment when the legitimacy of attacking civilian targets was fiercely contested. The German air offensive that became the **Battle of Britain** began in earnest on **11 August 1940**, and by **7 September** the London Blitz had opened. Armstrong's work was praised by **John Piper** but criticised by the **Sunday Times** as superficial — a charge that sits oddly against his later **Victory**, a large symbolic canvas imagining nuclear aftermath, shown at the **Royal Academy** in

1958.

Notes

Armstrong's fascination for ruined buildings and images of decay found a natural outlet when he became an official war artist. This bombed farmhouse may be the same one that Graham Sutherland painted in 1940, at Aberthaw near the RAF station at St Athan, west of Cardiff.

There had been little bombing before 11 August 1940 when the German Luftwaffe began the massive air offensive that would become known as the Battle of Britain. Military and industrial sites were targetted and South Wales was one of the areas attacked.

Armstrong and Sutherland produced images of what seems to be the same farmhouse and this suggests there was a deliberate policy of showing how far-reaching the war was and to demonstrate the effect of bombing on private individuals. The implications of this in terms of propaganda were urgent as the bombing of civilian targets was the subject of controversy. Pre-war expectations were that air raids would be aimed at strategic sites such as airfields, ports and factories - but on 24 August 1940 the first bombs fell on London. Retaliatory raids on Berlin were used by Hitler to justify a sustained attack on British cities and the 'London Blitz' began at five o'clock on 7 September when 337 tons of explosives were dropped on the city.

During World War Two, Armstrong worked as an official war artist undertaking short contracts for the War Artists' Advisory Committee, WAAC. In paintings such as *The Elms* and *A Farm in Wales* he recorded bomb damage to buildings such as churches and cottages. They were praised by John Piper but criticized by the *Sunday Times* as being too superficial.

After the War Armstrong produced a series of large symbolic works including *Victory*, which imagined the results of a nuclear attack. The painting was shown at the Royal Academy in 1958 and attracted considerable public attention. He was elected an associate member of the Royal Academy in 1966 and despite developing Parkinson's disease he continued to paint and travel until his death in London in 1973.

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<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sutherland-devastation-1940-a-house-on->

the-welsh-border-n05734

https://museum.wales/art/online/?action=show_item&item=29



Ben Nicholson (1894–1982)
Pill Creek, Cornwall
1928
Private collection

Unknown, Untitled

From Armstrong's bombed Welsh farmsteads, we move to an artist whose response to the war was shaped less by direct witness than by strategic retreat — though that retreat proved enormously productive. **Ben Nicholson** came from a dynasty of artists: his father was **William Nicholson**, his mother Mabel Pryde, his sister Nancy a painter in her own right, and his brother Kit an architect. He studied at the **Slade** but left quickly, and his early career turned on two decisive encounters. The first was his friendship with **Christopher Wood**, with whom he visited **St Ives** in **1928** and discovered the fisherman-painter **Alfred Wallis** — a revelation of instinctive form that struck both men hard. Wood's suicide in **1930** ended that partnership abruptly. The second encounter was with **Barbara Hepworth**, whom he met in **1931**. Her influence pulled his work decisively toward abstraction, culminating in the austere carved **white reliefs** of the late nineteen thirties. Exempt from military service because of chronic asthma, Nicholson moved with Hepworth to St Ives in **1939**, where the demands of supporting a young family — Hepworth had given birth to triplets in **1934** — led him back toward more representational, more saleable, landscapes. The abstract rigour returned fully only after the war.

Notes

Bio:Nicholson

Ben Nicholson was the son of painters and his sister became an important artist and his brother an architect. He trained at the Slade and was exempt from service because of his asthma. In 1920 he married Winifred Roberts and he devoted himself to painting still lifes and landscapes. He met Christopher Wood in the 1920s and they went to St. Ives but Wood committed suicide in 1930. In 1931 he met Barbara Hepworth and his work became more and more abstract. He separated from his wife, Hepworth had triplets and they married in 1938. In the late 1930s he painted white relief works but when WWII started they moved to St Ives and he painted more saleable landscapes. After the war he painted increasingly abstract landscapes.

Ben Nicholson was the eldest son of the painters William Nicholson and Mabel Pryde and brother of the artist Nancy Nicholson and the architect Christopher Nicholson. He trained as an artist at the Slade School from 1910 to 1914 where he was a contemporary of Paul Nash and Stanley Spencer. He was exempt from military service due to asthma and travelled to America in 1917. He did not devote himself seriously to art until 1920, the same year he married the artist Winifred Roberts (1893-1981). His early works were simple and traditional still lifes and figurative art. In 1921 he saw an exhibition of Cubist paintings in Paris, which was to influence his style. During the 1920s he produced mostly landscapes.

In the 1920s he met Christopher 'Kit' Wood (1901-1930) and they became good friends and went on painting holidays together. In 1928 they went to St. Ives and met the self-taught 'primitive' painter of the sea, Alfred Wallis (1855-1942).

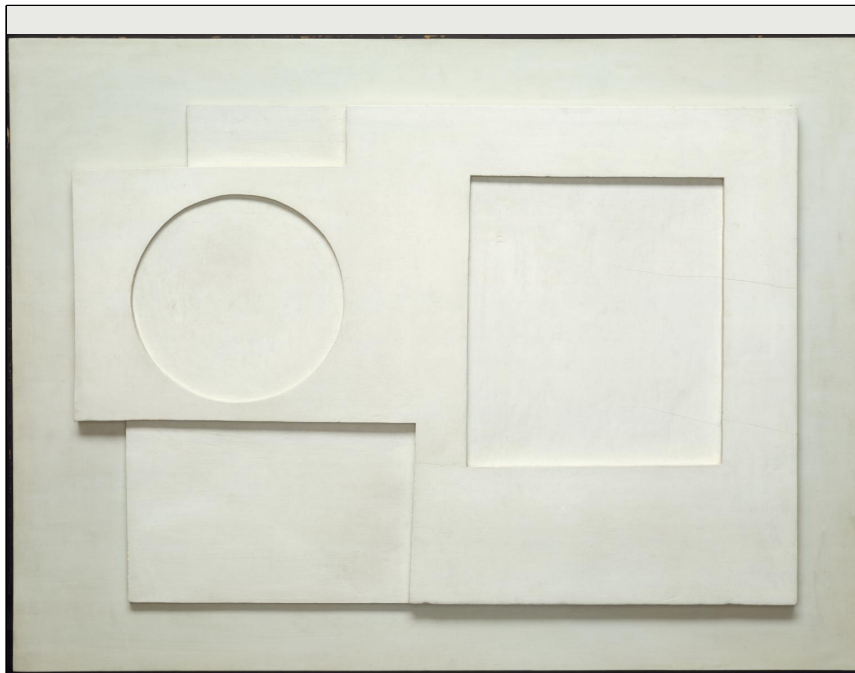
In 1930 and isolated in St. Ives Christopher Wood became addicted to opium which exacerbated psychological problems and he committed suicide in August aged just 29.

Alfred Wallis sold few paintings despite Ben Nicholson's support and lived in poverty until he died in the workhouse in Penzance in 1942.

In 1931 Ben Nicholson met Barbara Hepworth and under her influence his work became more and more abstract. Ben and Winifred separated shortly and in 1932 Winifred moved with their three children to Paris, and from then until 1936 Ben often visited them, sometimes with Hepworth. The marriage ended in divorce in 1938, and Ben married Hepworth in November of the

same year. Winifred continued to paint prolifically throughout her life and lived in Northumberland and travelled around Europe. Most of her work is in private collection but a few are in the Tate and Kettle's Yard art gallery, Cambridge. After the separation she sometimes used the name Winifred Dacre, an old family name. Her auction record is £145,000 at Bonhams in 2011.

This painting sold at Bonhams in 2016 for £600,000 (£722,500 with fees), double the estimate.



Ben Nicholson (1894–1982)
1934 (relief)
 1934
 oil paint on mahogany
 71.8 x 96.5 x 3.2 cm
 Tate

Ben Nicholson (1894–1982), 1934 (relief), 1934, 71.8 x 96.5 x 3.2 cm, Tate

The white reliefs are the natural place to begin understanding Nicholson's abstract turn, because they emerge directly from the Parisian encounters already touched on. It was in **Paris in 1933** that Nicholson first visited **Piet Mondrian's** studio, and the experience was, by his own account, revelatory — he described entering it as like walking into a complete work of art in itself. That same year he produced his first carved wood relief, and by **1934** the reliefs had shed colour almost entirely, reduced to white surfaces in which only depth and the fall of light do any expressive work. The Tate's framing of this is precise: the reliefs make shadow an intrinsic part of the composition rather than an incidental effect. That alignment between abstract art and **modernist architecture** — its insistence on natural light and formal economy — was not accidental. Nicholson was one of the editors of **Circle**, the **1937** constructivist anthology, and he genuinely believed abstract work belonged in shared, public life. The **Sutton Place** mural in Surrey is the clearest demonstration of that conviction: monumental, site-specific, designed for a garden rather than a gallery. Hepworth's influence on this trajectory should not be understated — they shared a studio from **1932**, and the dialogue between his pictorial plane and her three-dimensional form shaped both bodies of work profoundly.

Notes

"Like the cubists, Nicholson was interested in the ways in which paintings can represent space. In the 1930s, he made shallow reliefs in which areas of different depths define actual space. In the most radical of these, colour was reduced to just white or grey to achieve a sense of purity. Depth and plain colour make the play of light and shadow an intrinsic part of the work. This emphasis was related to new ideas about living and, especially, to modern architecture, in which natural light and formal simplicity were major concerns." (Tate)

Nicholson turned to abstraction in the early 1930s. This was partly due to the influence of Barbara Hepworth, with whom he shared a studio from 1932 and partly due to the impact Piet Mondrian's work made on him in Paris in 1933. He married three times and had six children. His second wife was Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) from 1938 to 1951 and she had triplets in 1934.

It was in Paris in 1933 that he made his first wood relief, *White Relief*, containing only right angles and circles. In 1937 he was one of the editors of *Circle*, an influential monograph on constructivism. He believed that abstract art should be enjoyed by the general public, as shown by the *Nicholson Wall*, a mural he created for the garden of Sutton Place in Guildford, Surrey.



Ben Nicholson (1894–1982)
1943–45 (St Ives, Cornwall)
 1943–5
 Oil paint and graphite on canvas
 40.6 x 50.2 cm
 Tate, London

Ben Nicholson (1894–1982), 1943–45 (St Ives, Cornwall), 1943–5, 40.6 x 50.2 cm, Tate, London

The move to **St Ives** in **1939** was not simply a retreat — it was a decisive reorientation. Nicholson had first visited the town a decade earlier, in **1928**, travelling there with fellow painter **Christopher Wood**, and the Cornish landscape had lodged itself somewhere in his visual memory. When he relocated permanently with **Barbara Hepworth** and their children, the practical pressures of wartime sharpened that memory into necessity. His dealers, **Alex Reid and Lefevre**, were frank about it: the white reliefs were difficult to sell, and landscapes were not. Wartime Britain had generated a genuine appetite for images of its own terrain — something grounded, recognisable, and reassuring. Nicholson responded, but without abandoning the formal intelligence of the previous decade. The **St Ives harbour** series, begun in **1939**, allowed him to continue his long-standing exploration of objects and planes in space, now anchored in an actual place rather than a constructed one. Colour returned with the landscape — greys, warm reds, and the particular silvery blue of Cornish light began filtering back into his reliefs. The carved planes that had once been purely white now carried chromatic memory of place. One canvas in the series bears a **Union Jack** added to mark **VE Day**, a rare, unambiguous gesture toward the world outside the studio.

Notes

He first visited St. Ives in 1928 with fellow artist Christopher Wood. Ben Nicholson and his family moved from London to St Ives in 1939, taking refuge from the threat of wartime bombing. This relocation to the Cornish countryside renewed his interest in landscape painting. For several years Nicholson's reliefs had been predominantly white, but he now began to reintroduce colour. His reliefs show the influence of the colours, shapes, textures and light of Cornwall with their hints of grey, warm red and silvery blue. In this work, Nicholson has also carved into the surface of the board to create several different planes. The treatment of space by its division into planes was central to the artist's work.

Tate, "Nicholson was at the centre of the London-based British avant-garde. Shortly before the war he moved to Cornwall with his wife Barbara Hepworth and their children. To earn a living he abandoned his white reliefs of the 1930s and returned to painting landscapes, which his dealers Alex Reid & Lefevre considered easier to sell. Landscapes, particularly those of British scenes, became popular during the war. Nicholson moved to St Ives permanently in 1939 and this view of the harbour is one of a series he began that year. They enabled Nicholson to develop ideas of the previous decade, particularly his experimentation with the positioning of objects in space. He added the Union Jack in the foreground as a gesture to celebrate V.E. Day and the end of the war. "

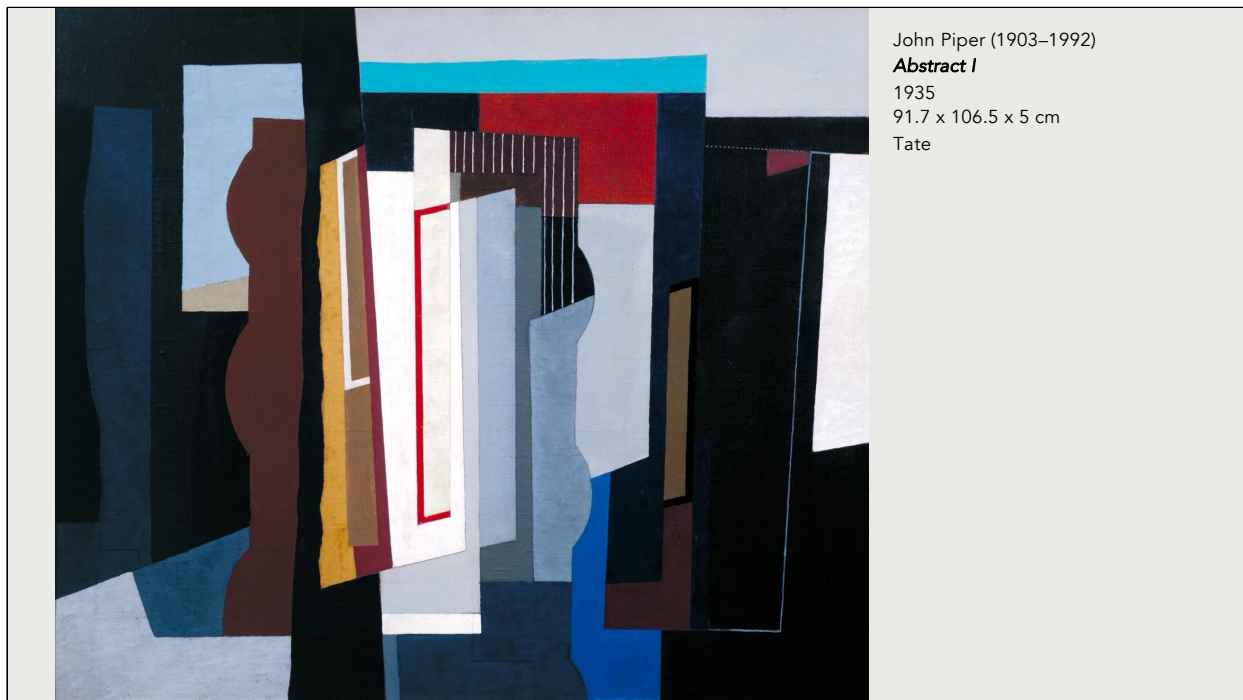
Notes

His auction record was for Fiddle and Spanish Guitar, sold for €3,313,000 by Christie's in 2012.

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John Piper (1903–1992)
Abstract I
1935
91.7 x 106.5 x 5 cm
Tate

John Piper (1903–1992), *Abstract I*, 1935, 91.7 x 106.5 x 5 cm, Tate

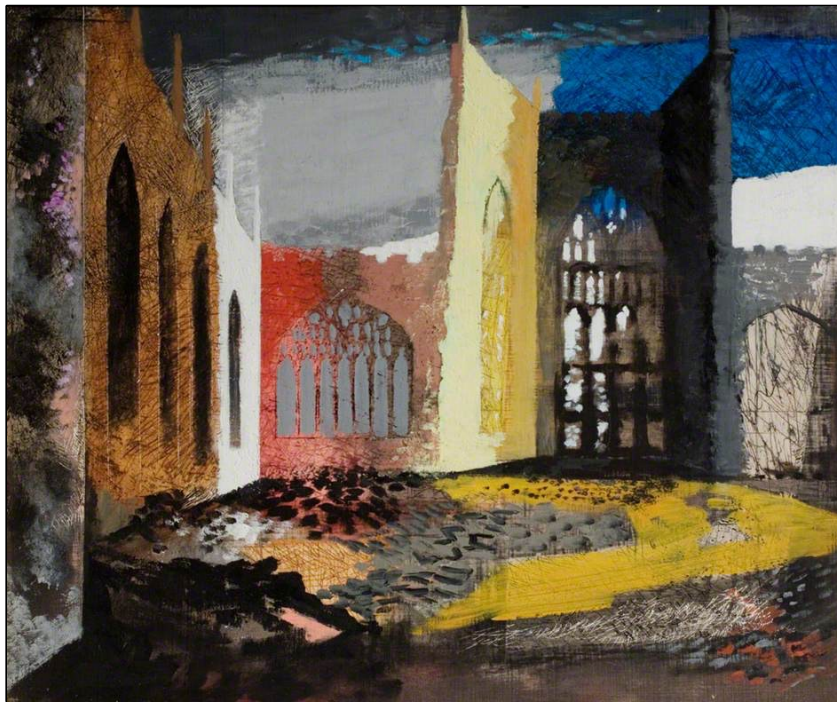
Where Nicholson responded to wartime pressure by rooting abstraction in a recognisable landscape, **John Piper** moved in a different but equally deliberate direction — back toward figuration, and toward the specific grammar of the English built environment. Piper was born in **Epsom** in **1903**, the son of a solicitor who fully expected his boy to follow him into law. Piper spent three years dutifully working in his father's office before refusing a partnership outright. The breach was complete: his father disinherited him, and Piper enrolled at **Richmond School of Art** and then the **Royal College**. He married the painter Eileen Holding in **1929** and joined the **Seven and Five Society**, the same loose grouping that had shaped Nicholson's thinking. When that marriage ended in **1935**, Piper moved in with the art critic **Myfanwy Evans** near Henley, a partnership — soon a marriage — that proved creatively galvanising. His **Shell Guide to Oxfordshire**, written in those years, showed exactly where his instincts lay: in the texture of English places, their churches, ruins, and weather. When war came, Piper worked as an **Official War Artist** on short-term commissions. His most powerful images are of bombed churches, above all **Coventry Cathedral**, where destruction becomes almost sublime — the roofless nave rendered in furious blacks and ochres that owe something to Turner but belong entirely to Piper.

Notes

John Piper (1903-1992) was born in Epsom, the son of a solicitor. As a child he explored the countryside and painted pictures of old churches and started making illustrated guide books. He had two older brother one of whom was killed at Ypres in 1915. After attending Epsom College he wanted to become an artist but his father insisted he join the family law firm. He worked there for three years and took his articles but refused an offer of a partnership. His father disinherited him but it enabled him to attend Richmond School of Art where he prepared for his entry into the Royal College of Art in 1928. He married a fellow student, Eileen Holding, in 1929. He held a joint exhibition with his wife and wrote art and music reviews. One review led to an invitation to join the Seven and Five Society. The Seven and Five Society was started in 1919 as a rejection of modernism but it was taken over by Nicholson, Moore and Hepworth with a modernistic agenda and they expelled the founders. In 1935 Piper's wife left him for another artist and he moved in with Myfanwy Evans, the art critic, in a farmhouse near Henley. Piper met John Betjeman who asked him to write and illustrate the Shell Guide to Oxfordshire.

Notes

The paintings stage-like interleaving of coloured planes reflects Piper's engagement with abstract aesthetics. Though Piper is more commonly thought of as a painter of historical architecture and the landscape, for a short period he was intimately involved in the avant-garde. This was evident in his association with *Axis*, a groundbreaking journal of abstract art, which was edited by his wife Myfanwy Evans. Piper had strong links with artists abroad and his own collection included works by painters Piet Mondrian and Jean Helion, as well as the American sculptor Alexander Calder.



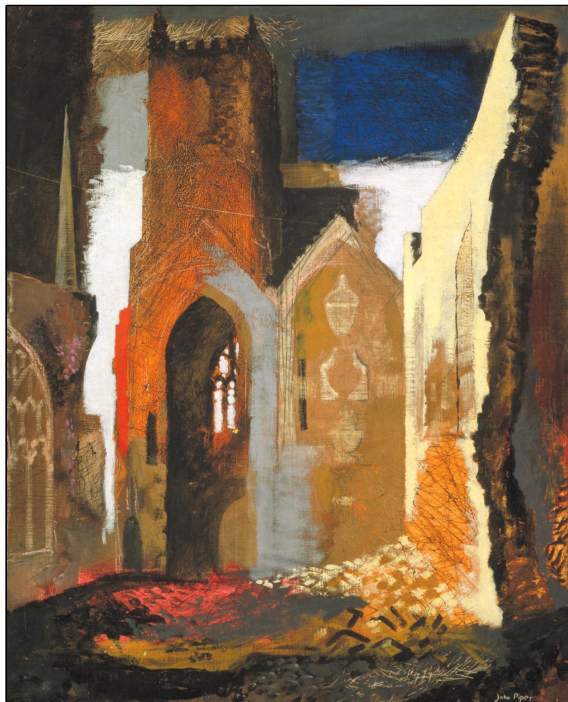
John Piper (1903–1992)
*Interior of Coventry Cathedral, 15
November 1940*
1940
51 x 61 cm
Herbert Art Gallery & Museum

John Piper (1903–1992), *Interior of Coventry Cathedral, 15 November 1940*, 1940, 51 x 61 cm, Herbert Art Gallery & Museum

That personal reckoning you see in Coventry was almost immediate — Piper was there the morning after the raid of **14 November 1940**, walking through rubble before the clearing-up had even begun. The destruction was staggering: over a thousand casualties and the medieval cathedral reduced to a shell in a single night. His access to such scenes was hard-won. **Kenneth Clark**, as chairman of the **War Artists' Advisory Committee**, had persuaded Piper to work for the WAAC on short-term contracts beginning in **1940**, and Piper proved a persistent advocate for his own terms of engagement. By November of that year he had convinced the Committee that he should concentrate specifically on bombed churches — a focus that unified his pre-war architectural obsessions with his conversion to **Anglican faith**, which had itself come before the war and deepened his feeling for the sacred built environment. He was one of only two artists given access to **Air Raid Precaution control rooms**, which speaks to the trust Clark placed in him. But it is the church commissions that defined his war work. The brief was stark and self-imposed: arrive at a bombed site as quickly as possible, often **the morning after the raid**, before anything was moved. What he recorded in those hours was irreplaceable — a visual archive made at the precise moment of maximum loss.

Notes

At the start of World War Two Piper was persuaded by Kenneth Clark to work as an official war artist for the War Artists' Advisory Committee, which he did from 1940 to 1944 on short-term contracts. Piper was one of only two artists commissioned to paint inside of Air Raid Precaution control rooms. In November 1940 Piper persuaded the WAAC committee that he should be allowed to concentrate upon painting bombed churches. This may have reflected both his pre-war conversion to the Anglican faith as much as his previous interest in depicting derelict architectural ruins. The terms of this commission meant Piper would be visiting bombed cities, and other sites, as soon as possible following an air raid often "the following morning, before the clearing up". He arrived in Coventry the morning after the air raid of 14 November 1940 that resulted in 1,000 casualties and the destruction of the medieval cathedral.



John Piper (1903–1992)
St Mary le Port, Bristol
 1940
 oil paint and graphite on canvas on
 wood
 76.2 x 63.5 cm
 Tate

John Piper (1903–1992), St Mary le Port, Bristol, 1940, 76.2 x 63.5 cm, Tate

Ten days after Coventry, **Bristol** absorbed its own devastating raid, and Piper arrived in the city on **24 November 1940**, within a day or two of the bombing. His time there was brief — only a few hours on the ground — but the sketches he made in that compressed window proved extraordinarily productive. By **January 1941** they had resolved into three major oil paintings: **St Mary-le-Port, Bristol**, **The Temple Church**, and **The Church of the Holy Nativity**. The speed of that transformation from rapid sketch to finished canvas matters. Piper was working against forgetting — both his own and the public's — translating the raw shock of ruined stonework into images that could carry the weight of loss beyond the immediate news cycle. The Bristol paintings share the same formal approach he had developed at Coventry: compressed, almost airless pictorial space, walls sheared open to reveal blackened interiors, Gothic tracery hanging intact above the devastation beneath it. That contrast between structural ornament and structural collapse was not accidental. It concentrated attention on what these buildings had been — centres of parish life stretching back centuries — and on how completely, and how quickly, that continuity had been severed.

Notes

Ten days later, on 24 November 1940 Piper arrived in Bristol just after the

bombing raids, a day, or possibly two, later. Although Piper only spent a few hours in the city the sketches he made did, by January 1941, result in three oil paintings of ruined churches, "St Mary-le-Port, Bristol", "The Temple Church" and "The Church of the Holy Nativity".



Eric Ravilious (1903-1942), Tea at Furlongs, 1939, 35 x 43 cm, Fry Art Gallery

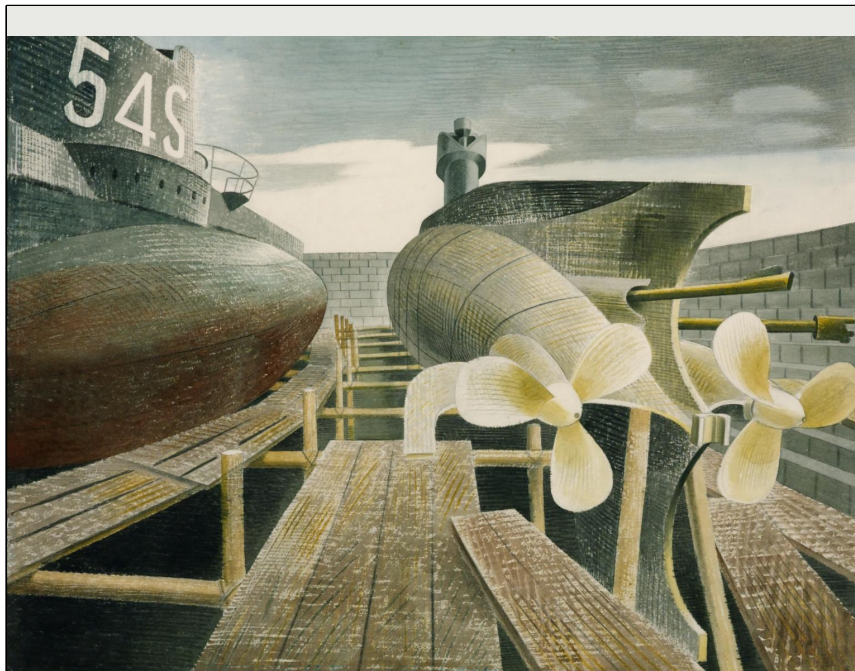
Piper's career extended well beyond the war, but for **Eric Ravilious**, the conflict proved fatal. Ravilious grew up in **East Sussex**, where his parents ran an antique shop, and won a scholarship to **Eastbourne School of Art** before moving on to the **Royal College of Art**. There he studied under **Paul Nash** — a connection that shaped his sensitivity to the English landscape — and won a travelling scholarship to Italy. By **1930** he had married the artist **Tirzah Garwood** and was living in Hammersmith, overlooking the Thames. The couple later moved to Essex, and Ravilious built a solid reputation through graphic design, wood engraving, and painting. Central to Ravilious's development was **Furlongs**, a remote cottage on the **South Downs** near Glynde, occupied by his friend the painter and designer **Peggy Angus**. There was no electricity, no running water, and that suited Angus perfectly. She rejected comfortable middle-class living with a conviction that earned her the nickname **Red Angus**, partly for her sympathy with Russia and her encouragement of others to visit. She was famously opinionated, gregarious, and galvanising — a figure around whom artists gathered, among them **John Piper**, whose name we have already encountered. His pictures of the **South Downs** — chalk figures, beached boats, the particular pale light of southern England — gave him a distinctive visual identity quite different from Nash's more anxious modernism. When war came, Ravilious was appointed an

Official War Artist attached to the **Admiralty**. He worked in Norway, the Mediterranean, and finally Iceland, drawn repeatedly to the cold geometry of naval machinery against vast, empty skies. In **1942**, he volunteered to join a search-and-rescue flight looking for a missing aircraft off the Icelandic coast. The plane never returned. He was thirty-nine years old.

Notes

Bio:Ravilious

Eric Ravilious grew up in East Sussex where his parents ran an antique shop. He won a scholarship to Eastbourne School of Art and went on to study at the Royal College of Art. He studied under Paul Nash and won a scholarship to travel to Italy. In 1930 he married an artist and lived on the corner of Weltje Road, Hammersmith overlooking the Thames. They moved to Essex and he had a successful one-man exhibition. He did graphic design and his painting was inspired by the landscape of the South Downs. In WWII he became a war artist attached to the Admiralty and he died after volunteering to search for a missing plane off Iceland.



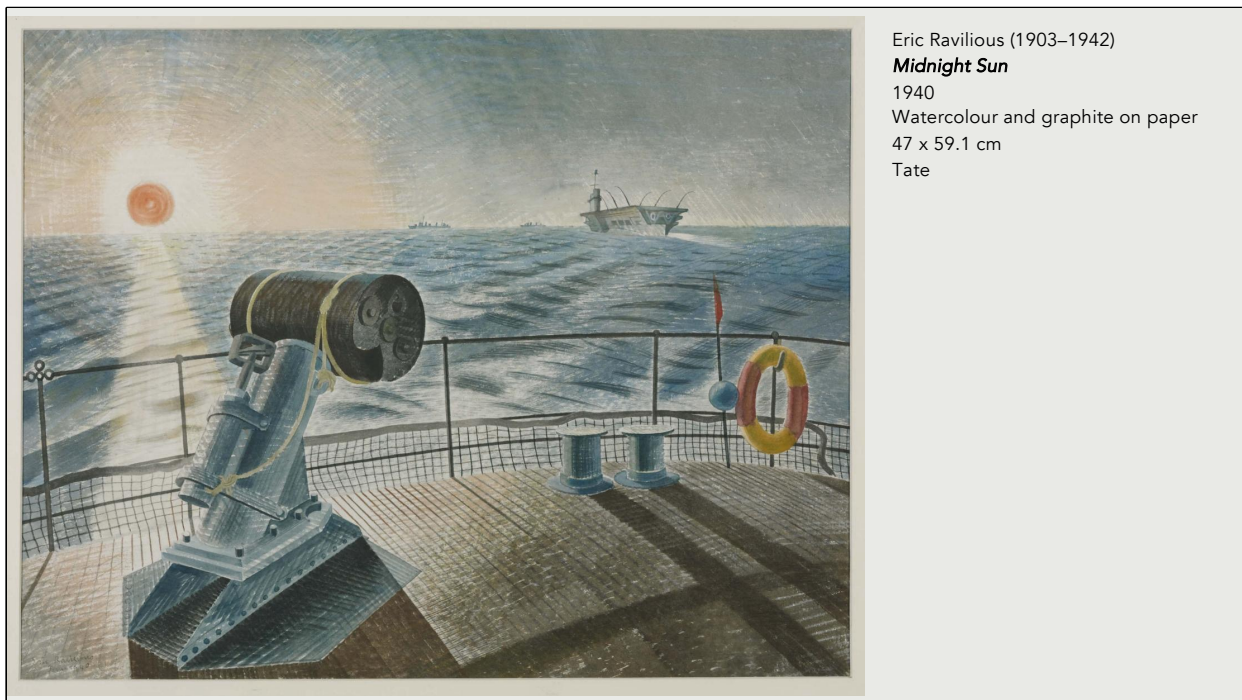
Eric Ravilious (1903–1942)
Submarines in Dry Dock
 1940
 Graphite, watercolour, crayon and
 pastel on paper
 43.2 x 57.1 cm
 Tate

Eric Ravilious (1903–1942), *Submarines in Dry Dock*, 1940, 43.2 x 57.1 cm, Tate

That geometric clarity Ravilious found on the Downs translated, with striking directness, into his work as an official war artist. He was attached to the **Admiralty** from February 1940, holding the honorary rank of Captain in the **Royal Marines** — a commission that gave him access to naval installations across Britain. ***Submarines in Dry Dock***, one of the most arresting works from this early period, was almost certainly painted at **Chatham** or **Sheerness**, where he spent much of his first two months on service. What is remarkable is how naturally the visual logic he had developed at Furlongs transferred to this entirely different subject. The dry dock presented exactly the kind of bold, interlocking geometry he had found in chalk downland — hard lines, compressed space, structure laid bare. Where another painter might have reached for drama or propaganda, Ravilious treated naval machinery with the same cool, analytical attention he gave to a Sussex hillside. The **watercolour medium** he had refined through years of landscape work proved unexpectedly well suited to industrial subjects: transparent, precise, able to render both shadow and reflected light on metal hulls. The **South Downs** had given him a method, and that method turned out to be portable to almost anywhere the war sent him.

Notes

Ravilious was attached to the Admiralty with the honorary rank of Captain, Royal Marines from February 1940. Submarines in Dry Dock was probably painted at Chatham or Sheerness where he spent much of the first two months of his service as a war artist.



Eric Ravilious (1903–1942)
Midnight Sun
 1940
 Watercolour and graphite on paper
 47 x 59.1 cm
 Tate

Eric Ravilious (1903–1942), *Midnight Sun*, 1940, 47 x 59.1 cm, Tate

That portable method was about to be tested in the most extreme conditions the war had yet offered him. In the spring of **1940**, Ravilious was despatched to Norway aboard a destroyer, a journey that took him well above the **Arctic Circle**. The result was **Midnight Sun**, one of the most disorienting and technically assured watercolours he produced on active service. At these latitudes, the sun never dips below the horizon for weeks at a stretch — a consequence of the **axial tilt** of the Earth, which keeps the northern sky in a state of perpetual, flat, amber light. In the northernmost reaches of **Norway**, around **Svalbard**, the sun remains continuously above the horizon from late April through to late August. For a painter trained on the specific quality of English light, this was an encounter with something genuinely strange. Ravilious met it with the same composure he brought to dry docks and downland. The device commanding the foreground is a **depth charge launcher** — the war's violent purpose held in calm, almost diagrammatic attention. The light is neither day nor night, and the composition refuses to dramatise that ambiguity. It simply records it, with the steady, curious gaze that defined everything Ravilious made during these months.

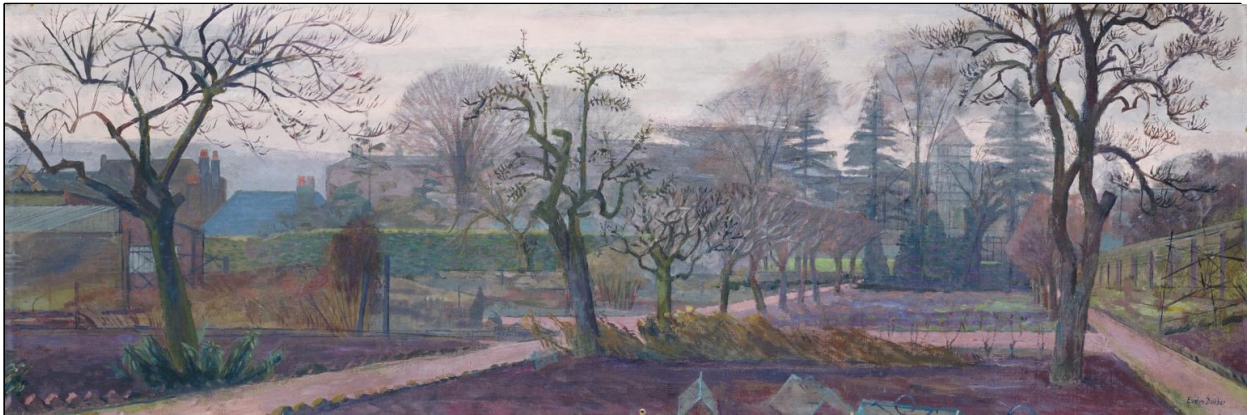
Notes

Midnight Sun was painted shortly after, on a trip to Norway in a destroyer.

Notes

The midnight sun refers to the sun never setting for part of the year. This occurs north of the Arctic Circle because of the tilt of the axis of the Earth. In the northernmost inhabited region of Norway (an island called Svalbard, formerly Spitsbergen) there is no sunset from 19 April to 23 August.

The device in the foreground is a depth charge launcher



Evelyn Dunbar (1906–1960), **Winter Garden**, c.1929–37, 30.5 x 91.4 cm, Tate, London

Evelyn Dunbar (1906–1960), *Winter Garden*, c.1929–37, 30.5 x 91.4 cm, Tate, London

Ravilious was not the only artist whose war work slipped from public memory — though in **Evelyn Dunbar's** case, neglect was longer and less explicable. Born in **Rochester**, she trained at the **Royal College of Art**, where her early ambition ran to large-scale decorative work: she spent three years on a mural cycle illustrating **Aesop's Fables**, and the allegorical register she developed there — figures freighted with symbolic weight — would persist throughout her career. When war came, Dunbar was appointed by the **War Artists' Advisory Committee**, and she holds a singular distinction: she was the only woman to receive a continuous series of salaried commissions from the Committee. Where Ravilious embedded himself in naval operations, Dunbar turned to the civilian home front — the **Women's Voluntary Service**, the **Women's Land Army**, the patient textures of collective endurance. A painting like **The Queue at the Fish Shop** occupied her for two years, its quiet, unremarkable subject treated with an exactitude that refuses sentimentality. She completed some forty works. After her death, her husband remarried, and her paintings dispersed to friends and relatives, effectively disappearing from art-historical view. It took **Gill Clarke's** biography in **2006** and the **Pallant House** exhibition of **2015** to restore her proper standing. The painting on screen grounds Dunbar firmly in the domestic landscape she knew before

London claimed her. This is her parents' garden at **Strood**, near **Rochester**, and her own note, written in **1956**, records that it was begun before she arrived as a student and finished around **1937** — a span of roughly eight years during which her training sharpened what her eye had already seen.

Notes

Bio:Dunbar

Evelyn Dunbar grew up in Rochester, the daughter of a Scottish tailor and an artist and Christian Scientist. She studied at the Royal College of Art and spent three years painting a mural of Aesop's Fables. Allegorical figures became a theme of her work. During WWII she became a war artist and was the only woman to receive a continuous series of commissions. She recorded the civilian contribution to the war including the Women's Voluntary Service and the Women's Land Army. She completed 40 paintings and *The Queue at the Fish Shop* took two years. After the war she continued to paint but held few exhibitions. After her death her husband remarried and her work was distributed to friends and relatives and so was largely forgotten until her biography in 2006 and an exhibition at Pallant House in 2015-16.



Evelyn Dunbar (1906-1960)
Baling Hay
 1940 or 1943
 45.8 x 61 cm
 National Museum of Wales

Evelyn Dunbar (1906-1960), *Baling Hay*, 1940 or 1943, 45.8 x 61 cm, National Museum of Wales

The patience and steady attention visible in that Strood garden picture carries directly into Dunbar's war work — though the scale of ambition is now entirely different. **Baling Hay** places us in the thick of agricultural labour in **January 1943**, when Dunbar was working as an official **War Artist** — one of the very few women appointed to that role. The painting shows **Land Girls** pitchforking great tangled masses of hay, what farm workers called bird's nests, into the open mouth of a baling machine. From there the machine compresses the hay, a guillotine chops it into measured lengths, and the baling wire binds each block tight. It is a process of transformation: loose, unruly material submitted to industrial rhythm. The **Women's Land Army** is Dunbar's great subject across these years, and she returned to it repeatedly because she found in it something neither sentimental nor propagandistic — simply women doing hard, skilled, physical work that the war made suddenly visible. The **National Museum of Wales**, which holds this painting, dates it to **1940**, though Dunbar's own documentation points to **1943**. That discrepancy aside, the compositional assurance here is unmistakable: the figures are locked into the mechanical process, their bodies rhyming with the geometry of the bales themselves.

Notes

Dunbar painted this in January 1943 (the National Museum of Wales says 1940). Land Girls are pitchforking 'bird's nests' of hay into the baling machine. The machine compresses the hay which is then chopped into lengths by the guillotine and tied into bales with the baling wire.

References

<https://evelyn-dunbar.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/baling-hay-1943.html>



Evelyn Dunbar (1906-1960), *The Queue at the Fish-shop*, 1944, 62.2 x 182.8 cm, Imperial War Museums

Evelyn Dunbar (1906-1960), *The Queue at the Fish-shop*, 1944, 62.2 x 182.8 cm, Imperial War Museums

From agricultural labour to the rhythms of everyday civilian life — **The Queue at the Fish-Shop**, painted between **1942 and 1944**, shows Dunbar turning her eye from the fields to the high street. The setting is **H. C. Hill and Sons**, a fishmonger on **Strood High Street**, a building Dunbar knew intimately from her Rochester childhood. The painting is a long horizontal canvas, over one hundred and eighty centimetres wide, and that format suits its subject perfectly: a queue stretching out across the picture plane, women waiting with the particular stoicism that wartime rationing made routine. Dunbar embeds personal feeling quietly into the composition — the **RAF officer** cycling in from the left is her husband **Roger Folley**, and her sister **Jessie** is the figure crossing the road. This is still the **Women's Land Army** brief in spirit, even if the setting has shifted: Dunbar's commission from the **War Artists' Advisory Committee** was specifically to record women's civilian contribution to the war effort, and a queue outside a fish shop is exactly that — domestic endurance as a form of national service. By the end of the war the **WAAC** had accepted around forty of her paintings. No other woman artist received successive, continuous commissions throughout its duration.

Notes

Evelyn Dunbar (1906-1960), *The Queue at the Fish-shop*, 1944, 62.2 x 182.8 cm, Imperial War Museums

Photographer unknown, Angel Corner, High Street, Strood, approx. 1920.

View looking west along Strood High Street towards the Westminster Bank in the centre. This was demolished in 1956. The Angel Inn is in the centre. On the left is H. C. Hill & Son, fishmongers at number 91. It was demolished 1959 and a Co-op store built.

Evelyn Dunbar (1906-1960) was born in Reading and when she was seven they moved to Rochester where her Scottish father was a bespoke tailor. Her mother was a Yorkshire woman and an amateur still-life artist and Christian Scientist. Evelyn became and remained a Christian Scientist throughout her life. She won a scholarship to Rochester Grammar School and an exhibition to study at the Royal College of Art. She and other students were commissioned to paint a mural of Aesop's fables in a school in south London, the Brockley murals. She spent three years painting the murals and the subject matter, landscape, allegorical figures became a theme of her painting for the rest of her life. She produced illustrations for books and magazines.

In April 1940 Dunbar was appointed by the War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC), as an official war artist, eventually becoming the only woman artist to receive successive and continuous commissions throughout the war. Her brief was to record civilian contributions to the war effort on the home front. Her initial subjects were the activities of the Women's Voluntary Service and later in the war, the Women's Land Army. By the end of the war Dunbar had some 40 paintings accepted by WAAC. One of those paintings was *The Queue at the Fish-Shop* set outside, H. C. Hill & Sons, a fish and chip shop in Strood High Street. It was started in the spring of 1942 but not completed until 1944. The RAF officer cycling into the painting from the left is her husband Roger Folley, while her sister Jessie is the figure crossing the road. The ancient building housing the fish shop existed until the 1960s, when it was demolished to make room for a road widening scheme at a point called Angel Corner. Dunbar is notable for her recording of women's contribution to World War II particularly the work of the Women's Land Army. After the war she and her husband moved to Warwickshire and then Oxfordshire and she taught at the Oxford School of Art. They moved to Kent and she concentrated on landscapes and portraits, later specialising in children's portraits. After the war she continued to paint but held few

exhibitions. In 1960 she suddenly collapsed and died in the woods near her home. After her death her husband remarried and her work was distributed to friends and relatives and so was largely forgotten until her biography in 2006 and an exhibition at Pallant House in 2015-16.

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<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/8171>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evelyn_Dunbar



Graham Sutherland (1903-1980), *Entrance to a Lane*, 1939, 61.4 x 50.7 cm, Tate, London

From one artist shaped by the English countryside to another, though **Graham Sutherland's** relationship with landscape was harder-won and stranger in character. Sutherland was born in **Streatham** in **1903**, the son of a lawyer, and his route to painting was anything but direct. He trained first as an engineer, then studied engraving at **Goldsmiths College**, where the etchings of **Samuel Palmer** became a formative obsession — Palmer's visionary, electrically charged pastoral world left a permanent mark on how Sutherland saw the English countryside. It was the collapse of the print market during the **Great Depression** that pushed him toward paint in his thirties, and his early canvases owed a clear debt to **Paul Nash**. His discovery of **Pembrokeshire** in **1934** was genuinely transformative. The peninsula's gnarled roots, sunken lanes, and peculiar light gave him a private symbolic vocabulary he would carry through the rest of his career. He showed at the **International Surrealist Exhibition of 1936**, though he resisted full absorption into any movement. His conversion to **Catholicism in 1926** grounded a spiritual seriousness that deepened under the pressures of war, when he was appointed an **Official War Artist**, recording bomb damage in London and tin mining in Cornwall with unflinching, almost geological intensity. The painting on screen, **Green Tree Form: Interior of Woods**, dated **1940**, shows what is in

fact a lane at **Sandy Haven in Pembrokeshire** — though you would not easily guess it. Sutherland called his method "paraphrasing": he did not transcribe a scene but distilled it into something denser and more charged. The Tate describes the result as fusing the observational rigour of **Constable** with the structural daring of **Picasso**, and that dual inheritance is visible in the way organic observation is pushed until it becomes almost architectural.

Notes

Bio:Sutherland

Graham Sutherland was born in Streatham, the son of a lawyer. He trained as an engineer and then went to Goldsmith's College. He specialised in engraving and was influenced by Samuel Palmer. He did not paint until his 30s when the print market collapsed due to the Great Depression. He produced mostly landscapes influenced by Paul Nash. He exhibited at the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition and taught at various colleges and continued with design work. He visited and was inspired by the landscape of Pembrokeshire. During WWII he became a war artist and painted tin mining in Cornwall and bomb damage in London. He had converted to Catholicism in 1926 the year before his marriage and in the early 1950s was asked to design a tapestry for the new Coventry Cathedral. After the war he painted landscapes and he continued to paint portraits of which the most famous is of Somerset Maugham and the most notorious of Winston Churchill.



Graham Sutherland (1903–1980)
***A Foundry: Hot Metal has been
 Poured into a Mould and
 Inflammable Gas is Rising***
 1941–2
 crayon and gouache on paper
 91.8 x 109.2 cm
 Tate, London

Graham Sutherland (1903–1980), *A Foundry: Hot Metal has been Poured into a Mould and Inflammable Gas is Rising*, 1941–2, 91.8 x 109.2 cm, Tate, London

That theological menace we traced in the Northampton Crucifixion was already being forged — literally — in the industrial commissions Sutherland undertook as an **Official War Artist** between **1940 and 1945**. This image comes from the **Guest, Keen and Baldwin steelworks in Cardiff**, one of several sites the **War Artists' Advisory Committee** directed him to document. The WAAC gave him specific briefs: bomb damage in London, tin mines in Cornwall, and these Welsh steelworks. Since the late eighteenth century, artists had instinctively mapped the fiery industrial interior onto older visions of hell, and Sutherland was no exception — though he pushed further. In **1964** he recalled being "fascinated by the primitiveness of heavy engineering shops with their vast floors. In a way they are cathedrals... And yet the rite — a word I use carefully — being performed when men are making steel, is extraordinary." The works trace a symbolic arc from raw ore to finished armament, a progression that suited the WAAC's propaganda purposes without being heavy-handed. Technically, the surface is a complex layering of grey watercolour wash, dry gouache, ink, and wax crayon — the wax repelling washes to create a mottled, almost combustive effect. The hunched figures recall **Henry Moore's Shelter Drawings**, and the visual language shared by

Moore, Sutherland, and **John Piper** across their WAAC commissions effectively became the defining idiom of **British wartime art**.

Notes

Between 1940 and 1945, Sutherland was an Official War Artist. He was almost continually employed on specific projects including, for example, recording bomb damage in London, and depicting tin mines in Cornwall and steel works in Cardiff and Swansea. This picture is one of several works made at the Guest, Keen and Baldwin steel works in Cardiff. Since the emergence of the modern factory system in the late eighteenth century, artists had often associated the fiery and awesome industrial landscape with more traditional visions of hell.

Though the artist does not seem to have wanted to show a coherent progression, there are depictions of various stages in each of the three main processes of the steel works: the refinement of iron from iron ore, the production of steel and the forging of that steel into armaments. The progression from natural resources to weapons might be seen to bear a symbolism that would have suited the WAAC's propaganda purposes.

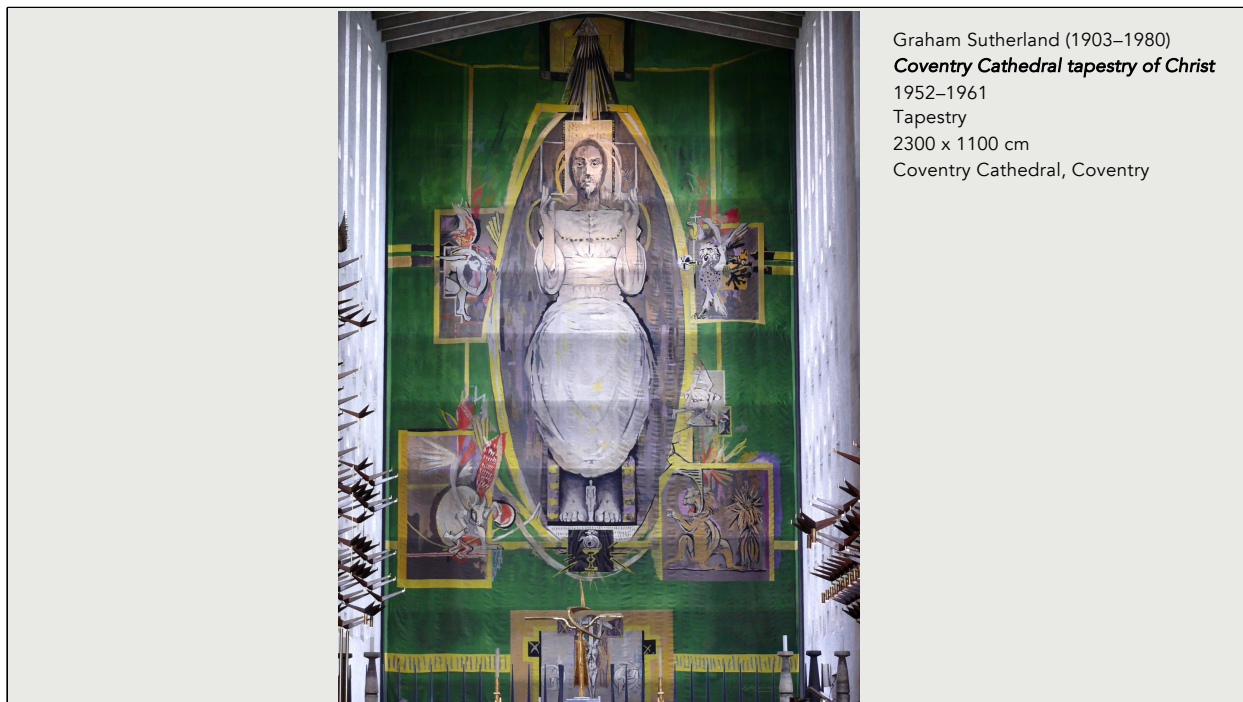
The media were applied in a complex layering to create the highly modulated surface quality for which Sutherland became renowned. The main ground seems to have been a grey watercolour wash, while the yellow of the flames is a dry gouache. Wax crayon was applied in several places - notably in the white area in the centre - and the washes have been thrown off by it to create a mottled effect. Much of the ink drawing was worked over the paint and it has come off where it went over the yellow. Some wrinkling in the thin white paper originated from its mounting on Essex Board, which is stamped on the back along the bottom edge; the board is concave, the centre being recessed by approximately 1/4 inch. There are several tears, cuts and patches in the paper which seem to have existed prior to completion. Towards the bottom right hand corner, the section of moulds on table tops and its immediate surroundings are painted on a large patch.

In 1964 Sutherland recalled that he was 'fascinated by the primitiveness of heavy engineering shops with their vast floors. In a way they are cathedrals ... And yet the rite - a word I use carefully - being performed when men are making steel, is extraordinary; and how primitive it all really is in spite of our scientific age'.

A similarly reassuring message had been conveyed by Henry Moore's Shelter Drawings which, by 1942, were already established as major works of modern British art. Though Sutherland's threatened bodies are frequently compared with William Blake's figures, the two here, like the receding tunnel-like space on the right, reveal the influence of Moore's images. Indeed, the style shared by Moore, Sutherland and John Piper in their WAAC work might be thought to have become one of the leading visual languages in wartime Britain.

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Graham Sutherland (1903–1980)
Coventry Cathedral tapestry of Christ
 1952–1961
 Tapestry
 2300 x 1100 cm
 Coventry Cathedral, Coventry

Graham Sutherland (1903–1980), Coventry Cathedral tapestry of Christ, 1952–1961, 2300 x 1100 cm, Coventry Cathedral, Coventry

From those Welsh furnaces to the New Jerusalem — Sutherland's postwar trajectory reaches its culmination in the **Coventry Cathedral tapestry**, the largest tapestry in the world at the time of its installation. **Basil Spence**, the cathedral's architect, invited Sutherland to take the commission in **1952**, and by early **1958** the finalised design was dispatched to the **Pinton Frères atelier in Felletin, France**, where thirteen weavers — twelve women and one man — spent years producing a work the size of a tennis court and weighing just over a tonne. The commission brief was precise: the risen **Christ in Glory**, enthroned in heaven and surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists — the human figure for **Matthew**, the lion for **Mark**, the ox for **Luke**, and the eagle for **John**. Sutherland's Catholicism, which dated from his conversion in **1926**, gave him an insider's fluency with this iconographic programme. The imagery rewards close reading. A small human figure stands between Christ's feet, measuring human scale against divine magnitude. A serpent emerges from a chalice, referencing the legend that Saint John survived a cup of poison through faith alone. Above the central figure, the **Dove of the Holy Spirit** crowns the composition — the same symbolic vocabulary Sutherland had tested in the **Northampton Crucifixion**, now woven into monumental, permanent form.

Notes

Graham Sutherland was invited by Basil Spence, the architect of Coventry Cathedral, to design the tapestry - which he accepted in 1952.

By early 1958, the design was accepted by the church authorities and sent to France, in preparation for the weaving. It was woven by 12 women and one man, is the size of a tennis court and weighs just over one tonne.

Sutherland converted to Roman Catholicism in 1926, and married Kathleen Barry in 1927. He was awarded the Order of Merit in 1960, and died in 1982.

The commission given to Sutherland by the Church authorities was to depict the risen Christ seated in glory in the environment of heaven, surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists, the human being (representing St. Matthew), the lion (representing St. Mark), the bull or calf (representing St. Luke) and the eagle (representing St. John).

There are other symbols woven into the tapestry. Above 'Christ in Glory' is the Dove of the Holy Spirit.

A human figure appears between the feet of Christ, symbolising both the relative smallness of human beings and the majesty and caring love of God for us.

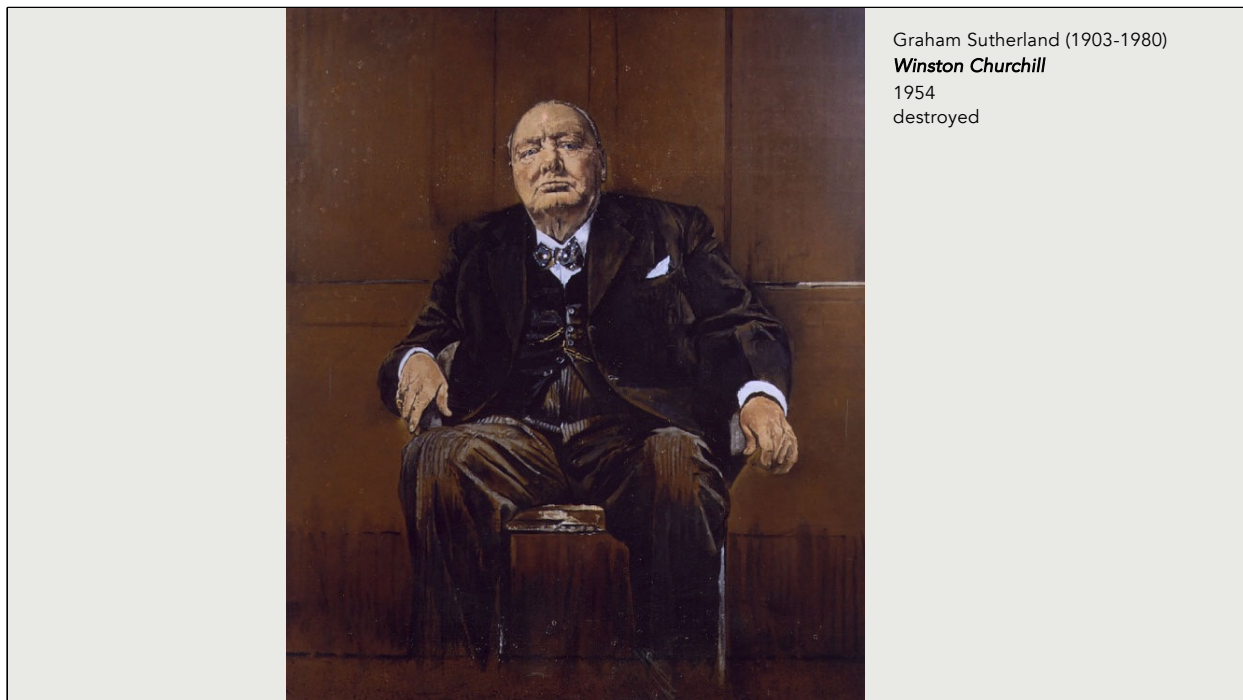
There is a serpent emerging from the cup or chalice. This is a reference to a legend that St. John was given a cup of poison to drink. He drank in faith and the poison (the serpent) did him no harm.

The lower section of the tapestry shows Jesus on the cross, with Mary his mother (John Bridgeman's statue) gazing up at him from the Lady Chapel itself.

The two shapes on either side below Christ's arms are those of angels hiding their faces from so much suffering.

References

<http://www.coventrytelegraph.net/news/coventry-news/symbols-serpents-10-facts-coventry-8709841>



Graham Sutherland (1903-1980), *Winston Churchill*, 1954, destroyed

That charge of cruelty reached its most spectacular expression in Sutherland's portrait of **Winston Churchill**, commissioned in **1954** and paid for by donations from members of both Houses of Parliament — a gift to mark Churchill's eightieth birthday. The fee was **one thousand guineas**. Sutherland's compositional thinking was precise, as always. He chose a square format in direct response to a remark Churchill himself had made: "I am a rock." Churchill is shown gripping the arms of his chair in a pose consciously referencing the **Daniel Chester French** statue of **Abraham Lincoln** in Washington, the posture of weary, settled authority. At the unveiling Churchill described it publicly as "a remarkable example of modern art," delivering the line to laughter — the audience understood perfectly that he was damning it. In private he was blunter, saying the painting made him look half-witted. Lady Churchill found it equally intolerable. The portrait disappeared into the cellar at **Chartwell** and was eventually destroyed — burned on the orders of Lady Churchill — an act Sutherland called "an act of vandalism." It remains one of the most notorious destructions of a commissioned portrait in British cultural history, and a measure of how seriously Sutherland's psychological honesty could wound.

Notes

In 1954 Graham Sutherland was commissioned to produce a portrait of Winston Churchill. The painting cost 1,000 guineas and was paid for by donations from members of the House of Commons. Churchill disapproved of the painting when it was unveiled as he thought it made him look 'half-witted'. At the opening ceremony he described it as "a remarkable example of modern art" to much laughter from his audience. It was kept in the cellar at Chartwell and later burned by Churchill's secretary and brother at his farm. Sutherland chose a square format to reflect a remark by Churchill, "I am a rock" and he is shown grasping the arms of the chair as a reference to the statue of US President Abraham Lincoln in Washington, D.C. Sutherland described the destruction of the portrait as an "act of vandalism".

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Graham
Sutherland
Winston Churchill
1954

This talk has moved through British art under the pressure of the Second World War, from Lowry's industrial solitude and Nash's surrealist aerial visions, through Ravilious's geometric calm, Dunbar's quiet documentation of women's endurance, Armstrong's cold political fury, and Piper's elegies for bombed churches, arriving finally at Sutherland's molten steelworks and the psychological confrontations of his portraits. Together these artists define what it meant to bear witness — each on entirely their own terms.



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