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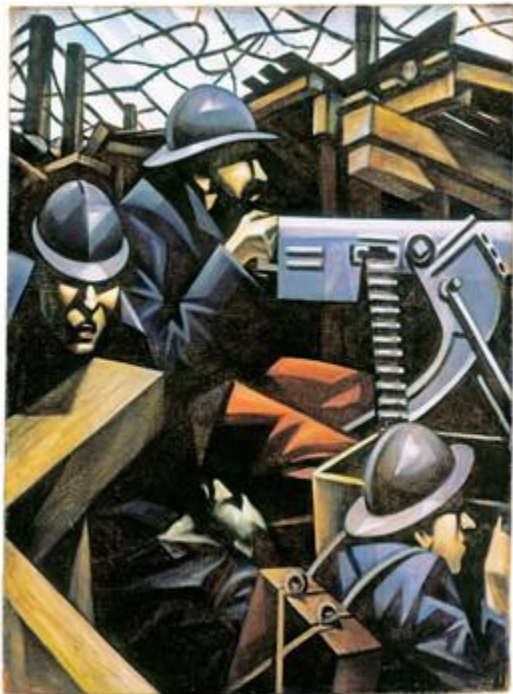
MASTERPIECE

‘La Mitrailleuse’ (1915) by C.R.W. Nevinson

“War and Death in the Age of the Machine”

by E.A. Carmean, Jr.

This July and August marks the centenary of the opening months of World War I. That somber occasion's coincidence with the current exhibition "Italian Futurism, 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe" at New York's Guggenheim Museum brings to mind the ill-judged pro-war messages of the Futurists and associated artists.



THE PAINTER'S intimate depiction brought viewers into close contact with soldiers, in contrast with the often more scenic views of war photography. Tate Images / Tate Images

Founded in Milan and expanded to Florence, the Futurists were also active in Paris and especially London. The Italians' celebration of modernity, speed and the mechanical was embraced by a British movement called Vorticism, adapting the Futurist vocabulary of dynamic forms. The 1909 Futurist manifesto cheered military conflict, declaring "We will glorify war," and the Vorticists would soon proclaim, "We are the Primitive Mercenaries in the Modern World."

World War I put an end to such brio. The British artist C.R.W. Nevinson—although never an official member of either movement—would make ironic use of Futurist-Vorticist forms in war paintings conveying the grim facts and dehumanizing character of modern combat. This is especially so in "La Mitrailleuse," the artist's World War I masterwork. Part of the Tate Gallery's permanent collection, it is on loan to the Imperial War Museum for "Truth and Memory: British Art of the First World War," which runs through March 8, 2015.

Unable to pass a military physical examination, Nevinson at the start of the war had volunteered as a medic and driver in the new motorized ambulance corps that Henry Nevinson, his war-correspondent father, had helped establish.

The initial confrontations between the German army and the Allied Forces (then Belgium, Britain, Canada and France) were military exchanges of advancing, retreating and entrenching. The result would be a long battlefront stretching across Western Europe. Soldiers were positioned in facing dug trenches to exchange fire across an empty zone separating the forces. The war would last more than four years, with some 10 million military casualties, many in these death-dealing engagements.

This is the subject of "La Mitrailleuse." Nevinson knew trench warfare from his ambulance service, including at the First Battle of Ypres in October-November 1914, with the Allies defending the vital English Channel. This place would gain lasting fame when the next spring's Second Battle of Ypres inspired the war poem "In Flanders Fields" by John McCrae. By then, Nevinson's weak health found him returned to London. He painted "La Mitrailleuse" in November 1915, during the last two days of a honeymoon with his (remarkably understanding) new bride.

The picture's composition—using a Vorticists' layout of long diagonals and crisp, angular shapes—depicts an Allied machine-gun emplacement: La Mitrailleuse is a French term for this weapon. In a dark pit, we see three Allied soldiers at war. Dark beards would tell 1916 viewers that the men had been on duty for days. Aside from the red trousers—of a French uniform—these combatants are rendered in the same cold tones and hard-edged shapes of their mechanical weapon and metallic helmets. One soldier mans the gun, while two others tend to the ammunition.

A fourth soldier—at first, almost unseen—lies dead on the trench's floor (with a triangular nose in lighter tone and left eye in an opposing dark triangle). Looming above are hints of a blue

sky—normally a sign of hopeful, trouble-free times, and sometimes a religious one, as in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel": "That saints will aid if men will call: / For the blue sky bends over all!" But here this sky—a marquee of peace, help—is fenced-off by strands of barbed wire.

A month after "La Mitrailleuse" was painted, "In Flanders Fields" was published in Punch magazine to immediate acclaim. In March 1916, Nevinson's painting went on view at London's Grafton Galleries. (It would enter the Tate Gallery the next year.) Certainly nothing like "La Mitrailleuse" had been seen before. The picture's particular genius comes from the masterly way Nevinson froze the normally action-evoking vocabulary of Futurism. This arrested pictorial tension captured the unrelenting strain experienced by trench warfare's soldiers, burrowed like waiting animals and always alert for an unpredictable sniper shot or sudden explosive exchanges.

Nevinson's first-hand account—visual reporting akin to the descriptive words of his war-correspondent father—drew great attention and praise. His intimate depiction brought viewers into close contact with soldiers, in contrast with the often more scenic views of war photography. Figures as different as George Bernard Shaw, Lady Diana Manners and Winston Churchill came to see the painting.

Most striking—if adulatory—was the opinion of Walter Sickert, the venerable painter of an earlier and more traditional generation: Writing in the Burlington Magazine, he called Nevinson's picture "the most authoritative and concentrated utterance on war in the history of painting."

But the work and its artist were thenceforth attacked by both modernists and traditionalists. A 1918 Punch cartoon depicting a later Nevinson show features a mother asking her uniformed son, "Is it really like that at the Front?" and he replies, "Thank heaven, no, mother." Others accused Nevinson of "pushfullness and publicity."

Following his 1916 show, Nevinson returned to the medical corps and to the conflict, now recognized as an official war artist. But even before the Armistice of November 1918, he'd lost his artistic bearings. According to Alec Waugh, Evelyn's older brother, Nevinson's most important postwar contribution was the invention of the British cocktail party. His later paintings were mediocre; the perceptive critic Hilton Kramer used words like "touristic" and "pictorial cartoons" in describing them. Adding damage, his 1937 autobiography was bitter, made-up and self-praising. Most bizarrely, in 1925 he had attacked himself, writing the Tate's trustees to take down "La Mitrailleuse," calling it the "World's Worst Picture" and adding, "I hope you burn it."

These sad, human failings continued to his death in 1946. They ought not to diminish Nevinson's achievements in "La Mitrailleuse" nor obscure the high praise it gathered as World War I was still raging.

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