

Conflict under the knife

A surgeon's view of battle opens wounds old and new



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War and Medicine *****
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When the First World War was at its height, Henry Tonks, a professor at the Slade, found himself serving in the Medical Corps of the British Army. Although qualified as a surgeon, he was an artist by profession, painting landscapes in a fluent, accomplished, conservative style that owed much to French Impressionism. His wartime duties also required him to paint portraits, albeit of an unusual kind.

As part of his work in the 'facial reconstruction' unit, he depicted the terrible wounds suffered by young soldiers. He painted men without eyes and noses, or with tongues loling from holes where their jaws had once been. He painted faces burnt so badly they had become little more than two eyes staring from an amorphous mass of cold flesh.

The resulting pictures are among the most moving visual documents of the Great War, full of pathos yet also touched by a deep irony. They are the work of an artist who had little time for the avant-garde movement of his day, but who found himself, none the less, forced by a terrible reality to paint pictures resembling expressionist, modernist visions – faces melted by fire into screaming Expressionist masks, faces rearranged by shrapnel and shot into living Cubist collages. Each image is labelled with dispassionate rigour – 'Dropped Soldier Nelder II' – although the artist's fellow-feeling for his traumatised subjects is painfully apparent. There was no surgical requirement to capture

their expressions, but he did so. The look in the young men's eyes is desolate, desperate, trapped.

Tonks's pictures are owned by the Royal College of Surgeons and infrequently exhibited. **War and Medicine** offers the rare chance to see a selection of them. But there is far more to the show than Tonks's work. It addresses the interwoven histories of modern warfare and modern medical techniques. There are sections tracing the Crimean War as well as the First and Second World Wars, Vietnam and modern Afghanistan are touched on. The approach is thematic as well as historical, so that, for example, 19th-century medical advances in hygiene are explored through an account of Florence Nightingale's work.

This is not, strictly speaking, an art exhibition, although art, design and film are often part of it – sometimes in surprising ways. For example, Florence Nightingale used the latest tools of 19th-century design, such as statistical pie-charts and diagrams, with great effectiveness, to persuade those in authority to see the difference between a military hospital that took hygiene seriously and one that did not. And while Tonks was using the tools of his art to record the wounded faces of injured troops, sculptors would be employed in an attempt to remedy such terrible damage.

The show includes a disturbing but utterly transfusing early black-and-white film in which a man with

almost no face is fitted out with a mask made in the studio of a now-forgotten early 20th-century sculptor. Another object lesson in human ingenuity under conditions of crisis is the small but elegant design for a cigarette-rolling device intended for use by men with no hands. In the

same section, artists and engineers are found forming an unusual alliance to pioneer the design of early prosthetic limbs.

One of the most memorable displays brings a selection of experimental models together – replacement arms, legs and hands for the huge proportion of young men who had to live with such disabilities in the 1920s and 1930s.

Around every corner there's something that fascinates and disturbs, whether it is a letter from a hapless soldier in the Crimean War lamenting the government's 'typical' supply in sending out packets of coffee unground – or a long-suppressed, American military documentary about the psychological trauma suffered by soldiers during the Second World War.

There are moments of black comedy, such as a public information film designed to teach littered Londoners how to treat flesh wounds – using make-up and special effects of the kind that would become the hallmarks of Hammer Horror movies.

There are also a number of contemporary works of art, including an all-enveloping video installation by David Corfield that lucidly transports the viewer into the belly of a modern Hercules flying to the aid of wounded soldiers in Afghanistan.

A polemic can perhaps be inferred from the exhibition, since its core argument is plainly that those who fight a nation's battles pay a terrible cost and deserve the best and most sensitive care.

Yet perhaps because it straddles so many areas of modern journalistic specialisation, **War and Medicine** has received little attention in the press. That is a pity. Anyone with an interest in the past, and its relationship to the present, will find it enthralling.

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