

Wellcome Trust's Exhibition of War and Medicine: staggering history of suffering

Posted By: [Rupert Christiansen](#) at Jan 9, 2009 at 11:40:53 [General]
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'Visitors may find some images in this exhibition disturbing'. How often one has seen this sign, and breezed past, smug in the knowledge that it only referred to some puerile bit of pornography or the sort of grisly jokiness peddled by Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst. Shockable, moi?



Heart-rending material devoted to facial reconstruction

But here is an exhibition where the conventional warning is necessary: I reeled out of [War and Medicine](#) shaking - my stomach churning, my head spinning, my knees knocking. Images of what I saw have been recurring in my dreams and creeping up on me unawares during the day. It displays, with exemplary clarity and an absence of sensationalism, a truly staggering history of a hundred and fifty years of appalling human suffering and of equally inspiring human ingenuity and compassion.

We start with the Crimean War. Here is Alexis Soyer's Field Stove, an invention which allowed the fresh preparation of food on battlegrounds and in its way brought as much relief to soldiers as Florence Nightingale's hygiene. Here are mementoes of Nikolai Pirogov, pioneer of the practice of triage and anesthesia, and Brunel's designs for Renkioi, an entirely pre-fabricated hospital.

From the First World War, there is some heart-rending material devoted to the art of facial reconstruction, in which Queen Mary's Hospital in Sidcup was prominent, and some remarkable newsreel footage from the Royal Army Medical Corps, showing among much else the wounded being piggybacked by their pals and the hospital barges in which the severe cases were transported to avoid the agony of jolting carts on potholed roads. I was also fascinated by a propaganda film about preventive dentistry - I'd never realized how many recruits were rejected on account of their bad teeth!

The Second World War sees the development of penicillin (producing which was initially a labour-intensive process of meticulous complexity) set against the horrors of Nazi medicine - and it's chilling to see how many German doctors implicated in ghastly experiments and cruelties continued to practise and flourish into the 1960s. On a slightly lighter note, I loved a quaint information film put out in 1943 by the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, advising the ladies about the perils of gonorrhoea, 'sometimes called the clap' and syphilis, 'sometimes called the pox', as the narrator briskly puts it in her cut-glass tones.

But perhaps what I found most stunning of all is an installation by David Cotterell, an artist sent by the Wellcome Trust to Afghanistan. This is a darkened room in which video reproduces the sensation of being a sedated

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BLOG ROLL

wounded soldier taken to a hospital inside the hold of an RAF Hercules – the combination of haze and noise make this quite terrifying.

There's much else – including displays relating to psychological disorders and prostheses – in this deeply absorbing and magnificently mounted exhibition. Not to be missed, if you think your nerves can take it.

[War and Medicine](#) runs until 15 February, at the Wellcome Collection, 188 Euston Road, London NW1, 020 7611 2222. Admission free.

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Comments



Old School Esq

Old School will certainly be visiting this exhibition. No oil painting himself, he hopes to see some of the work of Henry Tonks, the renowned surgeon/artist, who produced those profound images of WW1 facial injury and reconstruction. Tonks was based just around the corner from the Wellcome building, at the Slade, as you probably know.

January 09, 2009
02:15 PM GMT



HedgehogFive

This reminds me of "The Guinea Pig Club", formed of Air Force burn victims treated by Dr. Archibald McIndoe. Their anthem can be found here:

www.junobeach.org/e/4/can...

It is made up of three eight-line verses (alas not divided here) and sung to the hymn tune "Aurelia".

January 10, 2009
01:35 PM GMT



joseph

Well nothing will surprise you. once you accept, that certain humans on this planet, have the lowest characteristics of human life. unfortunately, this refers to all aspects of human behaviour.

January 10, 2009
01:41 PM GMT