



## ILLUSTRATING A MODERN WAR

Many artists enlisted early in the war and painted their experiences in their spare time. Others applied their skills to military needs: draftsmanship, modeling, aerial maps, technological diagrams, topographical drawings, and target figures for small-arms practice. But the war was not just fought from the trenches.

The use of art as propaganda was overseen by Wellington House, a War Propaganda Bureau established in August 1914 to spread the British government's view of the war to neutral and later allied countries, especially the United States. By 1920, official war artists had created some 3,000 paintings, drawings, and sculptures, with Wellington House annually distributing between ten and twenty million items around the world.

One artist sent to the front by the government, Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, initially approached the war as an opportunity to apply Futurist theories of art, which celebrated the speed, technology, and violence of the modern era, to capture the “crudeness, violence and brutality of the emotions seen and felt on the present battlefields of Europe.”

When the war began in 1914, he joined the Belgian Red Cross after being rejected by the army. His portrayals of soldiers appear almost like machines themselves, losing their individuality and even their humanity in paintings such as *La Mitrailleuse* (the machine gun), which was exhibited in London in March 1916 and stimulated interest in official war art. He was sent to the front as an official war artist in July 1917 and spent time in the trenches, flying with pilots over the front, and even making an unauthorized visit to Ypres just before the Passchendaele advance.

His Futurist style united subject and technique, as is seen in the six lithographic prints in “Building Aircraft,” one of a series of lithographs in *The Great War: Britain's Efforts and Ideals*. Following an aircraft from assembly to airborne, his work emphasizes modern technology. The strong diagonal lines, typical of Futurist art, capture the speed of the aircraft and its production.

Nevinson's technique became more realistic, however, as his interest shifted from military organization to men as individual victims of the war. Although Wellington House included many of his works in series such as *British Artists at the Front*, the government censored some of his later works, including *The Path to Glory*, because it showed corpses.

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