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BOOK REVIEW:

ARTIST AS WITNESS: THE IMPACT OF WAR

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Clarke, Gill. *Artist as Witness: The Impact of War*. Sansom & Company, 2025.

Artist as Witness: The Impact of War (2025), curated by Gill Clarke, is a comprehensive volume tracing the centuries-long artistic legacy of war. Crafted to accompany the eponymous exhibition at the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum in Bournemouth from October 26th, 2025, to March 8th, 2026, the collection features artworks spanning from the World Wars to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. Its catalogue transcends the front lines by offering a panoramic portrait of war, encompassing the experiences of victims, survivors, and civilians, as well as those of combatants and artists.

The compendium is structured in two main parts: four introductory chapters followed by six themed chapters of commentary on specific artworks. The opening section provides a succinct history of war art, underscoring its significance at the Russell-Cotes[1] and the continued relevance of artistic reportage today. It features sculptures, engravings, paintings and lithographs with great historical, pictorial, and emotional value, depicting how the horrors of war permeate individual histories.

Both the exhibit and its accompanying volume momentarily interrupt the passage of time and hinder oblivion—what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* (19). These works

[1] Since the Second World War, the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum has devoted a substantial part of its holdings to artworks representing conflict and war. Under the curatorship of Norman Silvester, the Russell-Cotes hosted touring exhibitions of the War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC). At the end of the war, the WAAC distributed part of this collection to the Imperial War Museum and sixty additional galleries. Drawing on the catalogue of the 'National Exhibition of War Art Pictures', Silvester selected and incorporated significant works of art into the Russell-Cotes collection, including paintings by Charles Ginner, Henry Lamb, and Vivian Pitchforth (Walker in Clarke 17–18).

of art are archives of memory, which rely "entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" (Nora 13). These sites of remembrance now serve an additional purpose; as Andy Martin argues in *Artist as Witness*, reporting on conflict, whether as an artist or journalist, "can also help to document war crimes and crimes against humanity, not just regarding people and communities but in the destruction of cultural property and cultural identity. It is and can be a vital part of the process of justice, as the first draft of history" (20). These works are essential in preserving the historical remembrance and underscoring the importance of democratic justice when looking at past and ongoing conflicts. In this sense, George Butler's artistic production summarises the book's general aim: to capture the horrors of war that are universally familiar to those experiencing conflict, thereby bearing witness to tragedy and fostering remembrance.

The first commentary chapter, "War Preparations", focuses on the indispensable labour done during the war by women, men, and animals alike. John Lavery's *The Green Park, December 1914* (1914) and William Roberts' *Grooming Horses* (c. 1917 – 1919) portray the critical role of warhorses as "cavalry mounts, pulling artillery and ambulances or carrying ordnance and supplies" (Clarke 26). Archibald Standish Hartrick's lithographs immortalise how women often manufactured war supplies, and, along with Muirhead Bone's works, also underscore the industrial shift in warfare and the indispensable contributions of civilians to the war effort, as they were intended to boost morale against war disillusionment.

Foregrounding how wartime reshapes ordinary life, civilians remain as central figures in subsequent illustrations of World War II. Works such as William Gaunt's *The Day the War Was Declared* (1939), Alan Sorrell's *Men Sandbagging* (1939), and Eustace Nash's *The Darkened Bus Station* (1939–1941) offer glimpses into the quotidian. These pictorial representations echo the propagandistic assertion that World War II was a People's War, an idea which "indicated merely the involvement of the whole population, omitting reference to what they were doing, or what was or might be done to them" (Rawlinson 145). The images articulate the uncertainty of war and the suspension of everyday normality, as seemingly familiar locations are marked by unsettling intrusions: darkened atmospheres, gas masks in the event of chemical attacks, and sandbags to fortify buildings against air raids become elements which transform ordinary settings into sites of latent danger. Osmund Caine's *Spider Hutments, Mychett Barracks, Aldershot* (1940)

exemplifies this dynamic by depicting diverse men engaging in intimate acts of camaraderie—playing, reading, and resting together—even as the climate of alienation prevails; Hugh Casson's *Camouflaged Factory* (1940) and Albert Richards' *Anti-Tank Ditch* (1942) further exemplify how war not only reshapes routines and bonds, but also remakes both human-made and natural environment to serve its demands.

On the other hand, "Food Production" extends the focus on civilian labour introduced in "War Preparations". The paintings present a feminised agricultural landscape where women's collective labour is shown as fundamental to the wartime effort. In these paintings and lithographs, women's labour and sorority stand at the heart of the imagery, underscoring the indispensable role of agricultural work during wartime. Gowdy-Wygant observes that the Women's Land Army was conceptualised as a gendered form of military service during World War II, tasked with the critical responsibility of securing the nation's food supply, while also providing participants with a locus of emotional support and communal identity—also present in the images—mitigating the profound sense of dislocation engendered by the conflict (109). Finally, at first glance, John Armstrong's *The Red Cow* (1940) appears incongruous, as it diverges from the themes of solidarity and social cohesion that characterise the preceding works. However, this apparent disjunction ultimately offers a more nuanced perspective on the effects of war upon nature. The painting underscores the exploitative relationship humans maintain with nature, revealing how landscapes accommodate both the theatres of war and food production.

In this sense, *Artist as Witness* further emphasises the violent backdrop of conflict, targeting both civilians and combatants in "Under Attack" and "Theatres of War". Whereas the former chapter deals with wartime urban destruction, the latter depicts images of destruction, violence, and combat at the front lines. As Sarah Percy notes, "there was no longer any distinction between the front lines of battle and the safety of home" (ch. 9). Dorothy Copsey's *In the School Shelter, Golders Green* (1940) and Amy J. Drucker's *Air Raid Shelter* (1916) evoke a claustrophobic feeling, a sense of alienation and loss of identity under the attacks, as the protagonists of these paintings are faceless. As Rawlinson notes, life was mechanised under the impositions of wartime, thus creating a profound crisis of identity (35). Amid the imminent death and ravaged domesticity, artworks present factual and allegorical representations of horror, revealing the

desecration of civilian lives, as well as the destruction of democratic institutions, as etched in William Washington's *The 'Ayes' Lobby, House of Commons* (1941).

Natural devastation at the front parallels the city ruins of the preceding chapter in "Theatres of War". Although many of the images depict instances of combat, the landscapes convey violence with greater force. The paintings in which the environment is central to the composition depict the pervasive presence of death during and after war. In these works, forest trees stand leafless and devoid of animal life, while the ocean is polluted by the oil of bomb-stricken, sinking ships. War and death emerge as total forces, permeating beyond human lives into the natural environment.

Artist as Witness closes its pictorial compendium with the most explicit and devastating chapters. "The Costs of War" illustrates the crude realities of conflict—mass displacement, injury and death of soldiers, shortage of essential supplies, and defeat—whereas "Crimes Against Humanity" articulates the unspeakable: the industrialisation of death, that is, the Holocaust. Even though the paintings and sculptures in this chapter are not graphic, they convey the dangers of othering and dehumanisation. The section opens with the ritualistic *Burning of the Horror Camp – Belsen* (1945), which records the "ceremonial burning down of the camp on 21 May 1945" (Clarke 80). Yet, the most harrowing depictions focus on the vulnerability of children: for instance, Angela Skyes' bronze sculpture *Belsen Mother and Child* (1945), presents a cadaveric mother struggling to shield her child from violence, whereas Edith Hoffmann portrays the destiny of defenceless children condemned to extermination in *Where Have All the Children Gone?* (1944) and *Why?* (1944). The depersonalisation of death is striking: scattered toys and named cases, as well as the infinite line of faceless or skull-headed infants, convey the impossibility to give a human face to the Shoah, "not because the crime is indescribable, but because its enormity seems to have undermined certain currents of humanistic thinking which return to the face as the source of our knowledge of ourself and others" (Winter 12). Undefinition contrasts with the photographic precision of Laura Knight's paintings of the Nuremberg Trials, where Nazi perpetrators of the Holocaust, such as Hermann Göring, Rudolf Hess, Wilhelm Keitel, and Joachim von Ribbentrop, are as easily recognisable as their crimes.

Ultimately, *Artist as Witness* demonstrates that war art is not merely a historical illustration but an ethical act of remembrance. As *lieux de mémoire*, these artworks compel readers to confront both the persistence of violence and the responsibility of

memory in the present. Thus, the volume may appeal to war, trauma, and conflict scholars. In this sense, art is configured as a form of socio-political justice, resisting the erasure of human rights violations and assaults on democratic institutions in the past, while underscoring the necessity of preserving and defending these values in the present, thereby averting the recurrence of such atrocities in the future.

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