Book Review

In the first half of ‘War, Art and Surgery’ the delicate portraits created by Henry Tonks of soldiers wounded in WWI are showcased for the first time since being released from their solely clinical context. Tonks himself felt that his images should be viewed by only members of the medical profession.

Tonks’ use of pastel, an unusual medium for the precision needed within medical illustration, creates portraiture rich with fleshy tones, character and personality. These portraits are in contrast to the official commissions of many other wartime artists; their ability to evoke an emotional connection with their viewer is a timeless attribute in a world continuously advancing in medicine, art and documentary output.

Julia Midgley is an artist with a long association with medicine. In preparation for the centennial commemoration of the First World War, she set out to focus on the flow of injured servicemen being injured in Afghanistan. She was severely hampered in not being allowed to work in either Afghanistan, where the injured casualties had their initial operations (usually at the Field Hospital in Camp Bastion), or to see the casualties in Birmingham, where all subsequent operations were performed until the casualties were transferred to Headley Court for rehabilitation. Her drawings of the acute phase therefore are only of medical teams training, and the wounds she drew are not real, they are simulated casualties. This greatly reduces the impact and relevance of her work; political correctness has denied our generation the intensity of impact of the unfettered war artist.

Julia was, however, allowed access to the Rehabilitation Centre at Headley Court, where her light, freehand sketches capture the impact of the injury on the servicemen and women. Shown alongside Tonks’ work, we are able to appreciate just how far we have come in the rehabilitation and treatment of injuries in two combats almost a century apart.

Both Tonks’ and Midgley’s works capture the aftermath of injury in war, giving the viewer insight into both the difficult task of repairing the wounds, and the effect they would have on the life of the individual bearing them. The book is also informative on the history of art.

Henry Tonks was an unusual and impressive man. He qualified as a surgeon initially, then abandoned his medical career in order to pursue his love of art, becoming the Slade Professor of Fine Art at University College London. That would be remarkable enough, but in 1914 war broke out and at the age of 52, Tonks volunteered for service as a doctor. During service at the Cambridge Military Hospital, Aldershot, he met Harold Gillies, who pioneered facial reconstructive techniques and is widely considered to be the father of plastic surgery. Tonks was appointed as an official war artist and travelled with John Singer Sargent to France.
and wartime documentation. The text would have been greatly improved by commentary from military and plastic surgeons, to explain to the reader some of the background and nuances behind the surgical techniques demonstrated. Despite the limitations, however, this is a useful book which will be of interest to all those involved in the production and storage of medical images today, as well as to the military surgeon.

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