

# Brian Morgan and the Strange New Art

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I am really looking forward to introducing Brian Morgan as this year's Richard Owen Lecturer. Brian was brought up in Clydach, a village in the Swansea Valley and after World War 2 went to school in Gloucestershire. He studied briefly at St Martin's School of Art before bowing to family pressure and moving to University College London to study medicine. He qualified in 1959 and became the House Surgeon in Plastic Surgery at University College Hospital (UCH). After further training in General Surgery at Chichester and UCH he was appointed to Mount Vernon Hospital to train in Plastic Surgery. After 2 years as a Consultant in County Durham in 1970 he returned to UCH and to Mount Vernon in 1972 where he worked as Consultant Plastic Surgeon until 2000. He was an examiner for the Fellowship of the Royal Colleges of Surgeons (FRCS) in the 1980's then member of Council of the Royal College of Surgeons (RCS) in the 1990's. On retiring from surgical practice in 2000 he continued to be a Hunterian Trustee and Archivist for Plastic Surgery at the British Association of Plastic Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons (BAPRAS) and developed a collection of artwork inspired by surgery which is housed in the plastic surgery office at the RCS.

He was a member of the team that treated victims of the King's Cross fire in 1987, working ceaselessly with colleagues for 48 hours during and after the fire and then embarking on years of reconstruction and repair.

The fire, which was thought to have been caused by the design of the wooden escalators in the station, produced a fireball that exploded through the ticket hall killing 31 people and injuring 100 more. His own painting of the fireball is based on photos taken in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and on survivors' descriptions. "One policeman gave me such a graphic account I felt I wanted to paint it," he said. His paintings also include landscapes, as well as medical subjects such as melanomas and breast implants.

Mr Morgan's lecture will feature the development of plastic surgery during the 2 World Wars of the 20th century and will be the final one in a trilogy of Richard Owen Lectures that have featured the history of surgery in World War 1. As a special feature of this year's lecture Mr Morgan is planning to have an exhibition in the Education Centre featuring the work that artists Henry Tonks and Dickie Orpen produced during the 2 World Wars and also some of his own artwork.



Painting of the London fireball by Brian Morgan

Perhaps one of the most unusual developments of the World War 1 was the War Artist scheme established in 1916. I became interested in this whilst researching the experience of a young surgeon from Kendal called Howard Somervell who treated injured soldiers from the Somme battlefield.<sup>1</sup> To give some background to Mr Morgan's lecture, here's a short account of the War artist scheme.

## THE WAR ARTISTS

In response to the discovery that there was a German Propaganda Unit, the British War Propaganda Bureau was established on 2 September 1914 under the leadership of Liberal MP Charles Masterman at Wellington House, London.

On the Western Front, press photographers were excluded by all sides early in the war. From 1916 onwards official restrictions on soldiers taking private photographs were increasingly enforced, and a few soldiers were court-martialed for owning cameras in a war zone. Although the British, French and German armies all employed official photographers for military purposes, a limited number of photographs were released to newspapers and photographic exhibitions to provide a historical record of the war.

The official War Artist Scheme was instigated after lobbying by an artist called William Rothenstein. Rothenstein had been brought up in a working class area of Bradford called White Abbey, the son of German immigrants who came to Yorkshire to work in the textile industry. Rothenstein studied at the Slade School of Art in

London, leaving in 1893 to begin a successful career as a portrait artist. At the outbreak of World War 1, he applied with his 2 brothers to change his surname to Rutherford but at the last minute he decided to keep his original surname.

With a Belgian friend, Rothenstein visited the British front lines near Ypres and was “so impressed by the dramatic character of the scene that I determined when I got home to petition that artists be attached to the British forces, to make records of the scene of war”.<sup>2</sup> Rothenstein lobbied the War Office resulting in the first war artist, Muirhead Bone, being sent to the Western Front in June 1916. A further 24 official war artists were appointed before the end of the war including William Orpen and Stanley Spencer. Towards the end of 1917, Rothenstein was invited to become a war artist himself and he readily returned to France in November. Over the next few months he became attached to the 34th Casualty Clearing Station and it was during this period that he became friendly with Howard Somervell and during the rare quiet periods they would paint together.

Perhaps the most fascinating of the official world war one artists, Henry Tonks had studied medicine in Brighton and London and developed an interest in art as a medical student. He was house surgeon to Sir Frederick Treves at the London Hospital before gaining his FRCS in 1888. Having decided on a career as an artist he was appointed as assistant to Professor Brown at the Slade School in 1892. The start of World War 1 changed everything. Tonks volunteered to work in a French Red Cross Hospital in 1914 and later with a British Ambulance Unit in Italy. On his return to England he was commissioned in January

1916, as temporary lieutenant in the Royal Army Medical Corp (RAMC), and worked at the Cambridge Hospital, Aldershot, and at the Queen’s Hospital, Sidcup.<sup>3</sup>

It was in Aldershot that Tonks was approached by a pioneering surgeon called Harold Gillies who asked him to draw the injured servicemen before and after reconstructive surgery, in addition to producing diagrams of the operations. Tonks wrote ‘I am doing a number of pastel heads of wounded soldiers who have had their faces knocked about. A very good surgeon called Gillies is undertaking what is known as the plastic surgery necessary. It is a chamber of horrors, but I am quite content to draw them as it is excellent practice’. The collection at the Royal College of Surgeons Museum in Lincoln’s Inn Fields contains 69 pastel drawings and 3 pen-and-ink sketches by Tonks; work which he later recognized to be the most outstanding of his long career.

Dickie Orpen, the daughter of Sir William Orpen, was a pupil of Henry Tonks from 1928 but didn’t see his plastic surgery inspired work until 1939. She wrote about how Tonks’ art had inspired her own work during World War 2 “I was overwhelmed by the truly remarkable quality of these pastels – a difficult medium which can produce furry or even floury and sentimentally ‘soft edged’ effects, but used here with enormous urgency, directness and speed, so that their vigour and veracity nature of the injuries, and not only of the injuries but also of the damage done to the person.”<sup>4</sup> Although not an official war artist, Dickie Orpen wrote to Gillies in 1942 to ask if she could support the war effort with her drawing. The result was a posting to the Plastic and Maxillo-facial Unit of Hill End Hospital in St. Albans. Here she produced an amazing 2500 pastel and pencil drawings in the operating theatre which now form part of the BAPRAS Archive.



Henry Tonks painting of injured soldier with saline drip

## REFERENCES

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2. Rothenstein, W. (1934) Men and Memories Recollections Vol. 2 1900-1922. London: Faber and Faber
3. Henry Tonks – Plarr’s Lives online – RCS England
4. Dickie Orpen – From ‘Dickie Orpen – surgeon’s artist ‘ – BAPRAS / Brian Morgan