



## The Great War— a graphic legacy

**The Great War—a graphic legacy presents a range of images by artists from different nations involved in the 1914–18 conflict, and from opposing sides: the Germans Käthe Kollwitz and Oskar Laske, Frenchman Théophile Steinlen, British artists Frank Brangwyn and William Lionel Wyllie, New Zealand-born Harold Septimus Power, and Australians Will Dyson and his brother-in-law Norman Lindsay.**



As distinct from the other works exhibited here, Käthe Kollwitz's three woodcut prints *The parents*, *The mothers* and *The widow I* (1921–22) all transcend the particularities of World War I. Their distillation of the devastating emotional impact of war on civilians, particularly women, raises them into the realm of great universal anti-war images. They also reflect Kollwitz's well-defined political and social views and her profound empathy with the poor and distressed, which later led the Nazis to condemn her work. Almost diametrically opposite in tone are Norman Lindsay's three recruiting posters (c. 1918), intended to appeal emotionally, and quite crudely, to their male audience. Implicit in Kollwitz's treatment of her mourners is the concept of a universal humanity; by showing the German as an ape in an additional propaganda poster (c. 1914–18) Lindsay literally dehumanises the enemy.

Käthe Kollwitz  
*The widow I* 1921–22  
woodcut  
Collection of John McCarthy



None of the works on display can claim to be a picture, or pictures, of World War I 'as it happened'. Before leaving for the Western Front at the end of 1916, Australia's first official war artist, Will Dyson, promised the Australian High Commission that he would 'make no drawings of actual military operations or places'. Paintings such as Power's *A shell-swept road* (1920) and *Bringing up the guns* (c. 1920) are dramatic reconstructions created after the events, intended to distil 'the sentiments and special characteristics of our Army', to quote Dyson again. They are also an Australian descendant of the long European tradition of 'history' paintings (and of classical history writing), in which composition and dramatic effect were their creators' highest priorities, not painstaking accuracy.

Harold Septimus Power  
*A shell-swept road* 1920  
oil on canvas  
Collection: Geelong Gallery  
Gift of Mr and Mrs HP Douglass, 1923

Throughout World War I, the censorship of photography by the military in the field, and further filtering beyond it, highlights the way that governments on both sides of the conflict were determined that their publics should see only a carefully edited—and to that extent distorted—impression of the conflict. Further, all artists, whether independent or government-commissioned, accepted extremely limiting conventions, particularly when it came to the depiction of violence or death. The general public were thus denied realistic representations of war's more distressing aspects. There is no visible wound in Will Dyson's drawing for a cartoon, published as 'Diplomatic corpse' in August 1914 in the British *Daily Herald*, just a month after the outbreak of war. Here Dyson allegorised his criticism of the failure of diplomats to avert international conflict. It also hints at Dyson's consistently critical stance of the aspects of the war; he denounced the profits made by bankers and arms dealers.



Given the limits within which artists were forced to work, the extent to which they still conveyed aspects of war's reality, albeit in a muted way, is revealing. In *A shell-swept road* (1920), Power transmits a frisson of the awfulness and chaos of battle as a horse rolls over resulting in a soldier being flung from the saddle. Postcards showing ruins of churches and other significant gothic buildings in France and Belgium were widely distributed among the allies, including Australians at home, as proof that German militarism was inimical to the pillars of European civilisation. However, the devastated architecture that dominates Frank Brangwyn's images of Dixmude in Belgium, and Arras, Cambrai and Peronne in France (all locations in which Australians served), captures something of the sheer destructiveness of war that transcends mere patriotism or propaganda, even though his 1919 'Ruins of War' series was a commission from the Canadian War Memorial Fund set up by Lord Beaverbrook. Their brooding darkness along with their ruinous subject-matter recalls the work of eighteenth-century Italian master etcher Giovanni Battista Piranesi, whom Brangwyn intensely admired.

Frank Brangwyn  
*Ruins of War: Arras 1919*  
lithograph  
Private collection, Melbourne



Neither Brangwyn nor his British contemporary William Lionel Wyllie had any experience of the Western Front during hostilities. Like many other artists who produced war-related images, they worked to some extent from photographs that had passed the censors' screening. The situation was very different for Steinlen, Laske and Dyson, who all had first-hand experience of theatres of conflict. Dyson underwent real exposure to the front line, where he received minor wounds on several occasions. The combination of well-recorded episodes of depression in the post-war years, coupled with his lasting friendship with pioneering war trauma psychiatrist Dr Reginald Ellery, suggests that his experiences left permanent scars that demanded professional treatment.

Will Dyson  
*Gathering fuel, Delville Wood 1918*  
lithograph  
Private collection, Melbourne



The ordeal of the winter of 1916 on the Western Front, one of the worst on record there to that date, undoubtedly confirmed Dyson's sense that for those in the trenches, the war was a matter of sheer endurance, not a patriotic gesture, let alone a great adventure. It was usually politicians, safe from the realities of the war, who wanted to identify the troops as saints, an identification the soldiers themselves overtly rejected. However, the posture of the exhausted looking figure in Dyson's *Gathering fuel, Delville Wood* (1918), communicates Dyson's conviction that the front-line troops were staggering under a weight similar to Jesus' cross. Norman Lindsay similarly used religion as a metaphor for the realities of war in drawings such as *The new Calvary* (c. 1915–18), which has less of the emotional impact of Dyson's lithograph. Thought to be inspired by claims of the crucifixion of an allied soldier, Lindsay's depiction of a woman and child on the second and third cross suggests that no-one would be spared the wrath of the German military. Additionally, the woman is thought to symbolise Belgium, described at the time as having been 'crucified' by the German invasion.

Norman Lindsay  
*The new Calvary* c. 1915–18  
pen and ink  
Collection: Geelong Gallery  
Gift of the artist, 1945  
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Dyson and Steinlen shared similar political and social views, and Dyson's own collection included some works by the French artist. Works such as Steinlen's *Les ouvriers de la victoire* (1915–16), feature French infantrymen, sturdily-built volunteers from rural backgrounds, far better-suited to working the land than trench warfare, dogged and persevering, but not heroic—like many of Dyson's subjects. Further, like Kollwitz, Steinlen could convey a sense of common humanity that comes closer to a universal vision in his treatment of grieving widows in *La gloire* (1915) or internees in prisoners-of-war camps in *Les prisonniers Russes* (1917). (Dyson also depicted German prisoners with real sympathy as vulnerable men, without dehumanising them.)

Inasmuch as artists such as Dyson, Steinlen and Kollwitz resisted the pressure of politicians to envisage soldiers stereotypically as heroes, instead hinting at the long-term burdens endured by both combatants and civilians, their art continues to offer viewers a century later a sobering commentary on war and the human condition.

**Dr Colin Holden**  
Guest author

Théophile Steinlen  
*La gloire 1915*  
colour lithograph  
Collection of John McCarthy

# The Great War— a graphic legacy

Geelong Gallery  
14 June to 24 August 2014

## ARTISTS

Frank Brangwyn  
Will Dyson  
Käthe Kollwitz  
Oskar Laske  
Norman Lindsay  
Harold Septimus Power  
Théophile Steinlen  
William Lionel Wyllie

## CURATORS

Geoffrey Edwards  
Lisa Sullivan

## GUEST AUTHOR

Dr Colin Holden

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Harold Septimus Power  
*A shell-swept road* (detail) 1920  
oil on canvas  
Collection: Geelong Gallery  
Gift of Mr and Mrs HP Douglass, 1923

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## Geelong Gallery

Little Malop Street  
Geelong Victoria 3220  
T 03 5229 3645  
E [geelart@geelonggallery.org.au](mailto:geelart@geelonggallery.org.au)

[geelonggallery.org.au](http://geelonggallery.org.au)

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