

# Art exhibit shows trauma of Canada at war



Thomas Kienzler and Tyler Dickerson view Michael Smith's 2005 painting *The Burial*, which is part of the Calgary Military Museum's new exhibit, *Forging a Nation: Canada Goes to War* at the Founders' Gallery. This is the first exhibition to open in Canada on the 100th year anniversary of the start of the First World War and the kickoff to a series of events planned across the country.

Chris Bolin/The Globe and Mail

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Placed next to a painting that shows members of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry in one of the defining 1915 battles of Ypres is the morose Burial, a huge abstract work with splashes of red and the brown outline of uniform-clad bodies scattered on the ground of a formerly green First World War battleground.

The new art exhibit at the Military Museums of Calgary focuses on the wars and battles that helped shape Canada's identity over the past century, but it does not shy away from the physical and emotional trauma – including artist and former Canadian Forces member Robert Venor's chilling depiction of the Korean War in the painting Medic in Balaclava, in which a mortally wounded soldier and a forlorn medic clutch at one another's chests.

The powerful University of Calgary exhibit Forging a Nation: Canada Goes to War is one of the first in a year that will be replete with centennial commemorations of the brave acts and horrible consequences of the First World War, which began in 1914, killed almost 57,000 Canadians and 17 million worldwide, and shaped the 20th century.

The exhibit – with pieces on loan from artists, private collectors, Ottawa's Canadian War Museum, London's Imperial War Museums and other sources – focuses on Canadian involvement in conflicts from the First World War to Afghanistan, as well as the centennial anniversary of the creation of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI), a regiment with much of its roots in Western Canada.

Lindsey Sharman, curator of art at the museums' Founders' Gallery – a school gymnasium turned into a starkly beautiful space for an art collection – said she wanted to show not only the moments of adrenalin-fuelled battle rush, but also the in-between, mundane moments, including the logistical nightmare of getting Canadian troops back across the Atlantic after the First World War ended.

Many Canadian soldiers did not arrive home until later in 1919, long after the armistice in November, 1918. Ms. Sharman points to one painting of a soldier sitting alone, writing a letter in a stark mess.

"This was painted Christmas Day after the First World War had ended. It was so surprising to me," she said. "You sort of imagine when the war is finished, everybody goes home."

Visitors to the exhibit are greeted by Raw Homage 1, a sculpture by Isla Burns that shows a forest growing out of a First World War helmet, and A.Y. Jackson's painting Screened Road from 1918. The Second World War pieces are weighted toward the Italian campaign. And the small exhibition ends with images from Afghanistan – one painting is of a Soviet tank graveyard under a red sky, and another is the ominous view of a dusty road from an armoured vehicle.

Now that all of Canada's First World War veterans have died, the exhibit is a useful tool for helping explain the intimacy and suddenness of that conflict to a generation separated from the Great War by 100 years of history, and massive changes to the technology of warfare and cultural norms.

Warrant Officer Jason Yardley, general manager of the PPCLI archives, points out that in 1915 – and the time of the Patricia's second battle of Ypres – helmets had not yet been sent to Canadian soldiers. Some soldiers in the painting of that battle have their forage caps, and some are not wearing anything on their heads.

"The Brodie helmet, which is synonymous with World War I, wasn't issued until later in 1916," he explained.

The exhibit runs in Calgary until March 7 and will move to Edmonton later in the year.

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