

Nevinson's first war pictures

Toward the close of January, 1915, a great art exhibition in aid of the Red Cross Society was opened at Burlington House, but though it was well supported by Royal Academicians and by members of other recognised art societies, the paucity of war pictures was very noticeable. Only one called for comment, because the historian is not concerned with paintings that have merit; he is concerned with paintings that have significance. Walter Sickert's "The Integrity of Belgium," painted in October, 1914, and showing Belgian soldiers defending a street barricade, was the first oil painting exhibited of a battle incident in the Great War. Still more significant than either of these, though only a prelude to what was later to follow from the same brush, were Christopher R. W. Nevinson's three contributions



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to the exhibition of "The London Group," held in March at the Goupil Gallery. Before the war Mr. Nevinson was known to the few as a young artist of promise, an ex-student of the famous Slade School, who had attached himself to Severini and the Italian futurists, and was painting according to the rather bewildering ideals and practice of that group of reformers. His three pictures at the Goupil Gallery—"Returning to the Trenches," "Taube Pursued by Commander Samson," "Ypres after the Second Bombardment"—still showed signs of futurist influence, but they were perfectly intelligible and based on what the artist had actually seen while driving his motor-ambulance behind the Belgian front line. It should be recorded that Nevinson, though subsequently invalided on account of rheumatic fever, was one of the first British artists to go on active service in Flanders during the autumn of 1914. His experience of the realities of fighting proved a wholesome corrective to the will-o'-the-wisp of artistic theory, but his vision of the new realism was informed by a knowledge of all the good that was to be gained from the most advanced artistic theory.

Influence of Italian futurists

Just as Dr. Johnson maintained that there was some good to be got out of every book, so it may be urged that there is some good to be got out of every artistic theory. The particular good thing to be got out of the work of the Italian futurists was their successful rendering of the suggestion of movement. This was obtained by a generous use of slanting lines in the composition, and this convention not only gives life and movement to such a painting as "Returning to the Trenches," but used regularly and with an avoidance of curves it also tends to suggest the movement of a vast machine rather than of individual human beings. It was the peculiar distinction and triumph of Mr. Nevinson to leave aside all the extravagances of futurism and snatch from it the two things that helped him to render realistically a new world in a new way. From the very first he stood apart from all other painters of the war



"Reclaimed Country" (1917)

by reason of these two things: his extraordinary power and success in suggesting movement, and the implication in all his pictures that modern war is not the affair of human individuals but the creaking progress of a complicated machine. The early picture, "Returning to the Trenches," illustrates in its lower half what Mr. Nevinson was doing before the war, and it may be admitted that it is not clearly intelligible. The upper half of the picture shows what he learnt from the war and the direction in which he was afterwards to develop, and though strange and curious it is perfectly easy to understand. These French soldiers, with their packs on their backs and their bodies and rifles sloping in the direction in which they are marching, are not painted as we see them; they are certainly not painted as the camera would see them, but they are indisputably alive and moving. There is no attempt here to give portraits of a collection of single soldiers, the endeavour has been to express the onward rush of an advancing army, and that impression is both vividly and irresistibly conveyed.

When he wanted to paint portraits, as in "A Group of Soldiers" (page 174), Mr. Nevinson was perfectly equal to the task, but he would not flatter. He must tell the truth, and the great truth about the British soldier after 1915 was that he was simply the British working man in disguise. Mr. Nevinson with unerring eye penetrated to the man behind the khaki and deliberately unveiled the son of toil. The hands of the foremost figures may be exaggerated (but probably are not), and in any case they emphasise the essential truth that these men belong to the horny-handed class. They may not be beautiful, but they are strong, upright, reliable, and good-natured, and most is clearly stamped with that approval which is one of the most characteristic qualities in the British soldier.

In landscape as well as in portraiture was always to get at the reality behind "The Road from Arras to Bapaume" (Vol. I, page 226) does not in the least resemble the view that a camera would take of the scene, but it gives the essential truth of a remembered impression. All inessential details have been suppressed with the result that the main recollection—the white switchback track of Roman straightness, the lopped down tree-trunks, the moving traffic, and the limitless expanse—are recorded with increased strength and vividness.

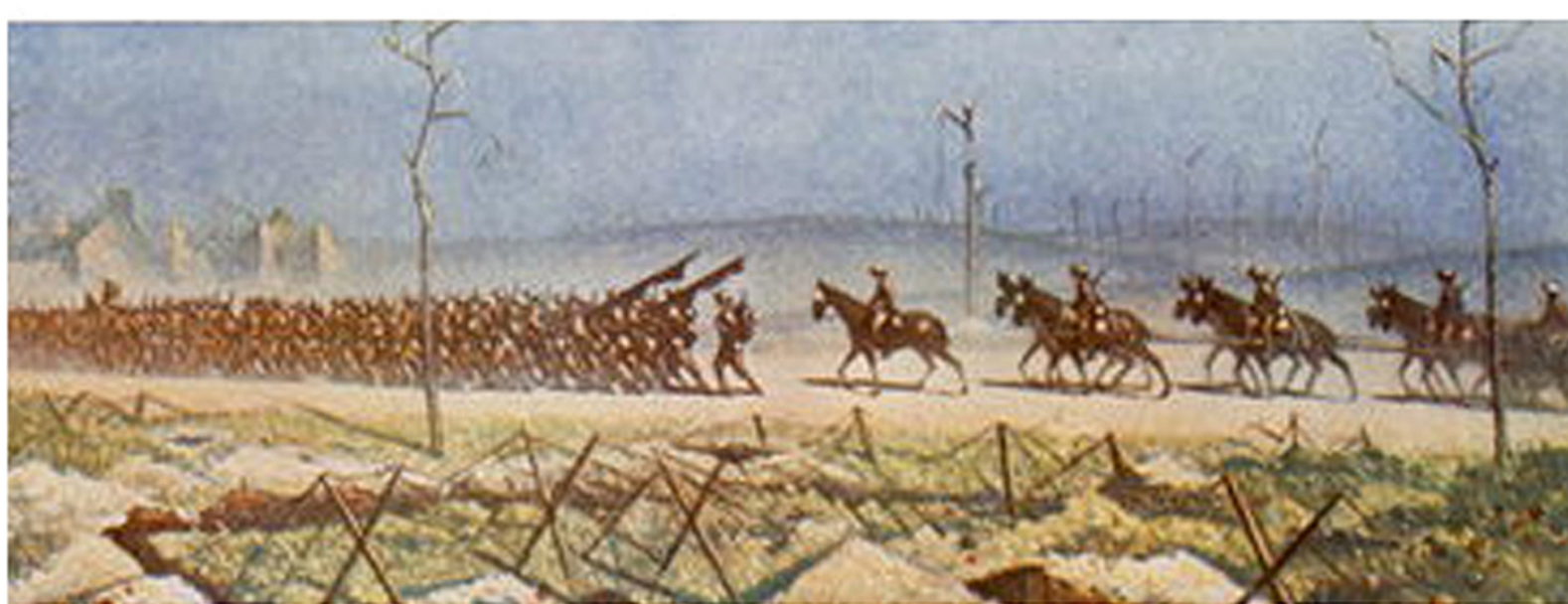
These, of course, are later pictures, but though Mr. Nevinson enjoyed greater facilities and privileges when he returned to France in July, 1917, as an "official artist" than he had done as a motor-mechanic in 1914 and 1915, the essential quality in his pictures, while gaining strength and clarity, remained the same.

The power of suggesting movement and the irresistible progress of the war-machine, which dominated his earliest efforts at painting the war, found perfect and balanced expression in his masterly series "The Roads of France" (page 165) and other paintings exhibited in March, 1918, at the Leicester Galleries. As the Parthenon Frieze commemorates the Greeks' campaign against the Persians over two thousand years ago, so the four paintings of "The Roads of France" illustrate the Allies' campaign in Northern France. By his device in seizing

C.R.W. Nevinson

"THE ROADS OF FRANCE."

C. R. W. Nevinson's masterly series illustrating the campaign in Northern France, and rendering a sense of movement and strained energy such as no photograph could possibly convey.



a bending road for his subject, Mr. Nevinson in the first painting of the series conveys an impression of the endless chain of vehicles going up to the front through country unravaged by the war. The very poplars diminishing in the distance all add to the suggestion of infinity. In the second painting the big guns are seen passing through the area of aeroplane observation and frontal light railways. The third shows infantry and horse artillery, beyond the dumping grounds, passing over country recently recaptured. The emphasis on the diagonal lines of the advancing infantry is more subtle here than in the earlier "Returning to the Trenches," but the method is the same, and an admirable suggestion of movement is again the result. Equally successful is the treatment of the gun-team, the taut legs of the animals eloquently conveying



"HEAD OF A GERMAN."

From a drawing by Sir William Orpen, one of the official artists on the western front.

the strain of the load they are dragging forward. This realisation of movement and strained energy is something no photograph could possibly convey, nor could the truth be expressed by an artist who drew miniatures of each horse as it would appear if seen closely. It must be remembered that these scenes are viewed from a distance, and that distance materially affects the apparent shapes of objects.

Four hundred years ago the great Italian master Leonardo da Vinci discovered that objects at a distance lost their thinnest portions. "Thus with a horse," he wrote, "it would lose the legs sooner than the head, because the legs are thinner than the head, and it would lose the neck before the trunk

trunk for the same reason.

It follows therefore that the part of the horse which the eye will be able last to discern will be the trunk, retaining still its oval form, but rather approximating to the shape of a cylinder."

Mr. Nevinson has good authority, then, for the omission of detail, and, remembering the wisdom of Leonardo, it would be foolish to criticise the fourth and last painting of this series because we cannot see every feature in the faces of the little parties of soldiers who are now cautiously entering upon the immediate vicinity of the front trenches. The men here have ceased to be individuals, they are only human atoms crawling about the desolate waste of war.

From a purely artistic standpoint there are two ways in which a painter can make history—he can discover a new way of painting an old subject, or he can discover a new subject. It was Mr. Nevinson's peculiar good fortune to be able to do both. Though different in scale and kind from any preceding war, there were troops marching along country roads and fighting in trenches centuries before 1914. With regard to scenes of this description Mr. Nevinson may be said to have discovered a new way of treating an old subject. But never before, save in the brains of romancers, had there been a war in the air, and the aeroplane provided the artist with a new subject of which Mr. Nevinson was quick to take advantage. "Taube Pursued by Commander Samson" was the first of a series of pictures illustrating phases of aerial warfare, of which one of the largest and most important is here reproduced (page 174). "Air Battle: Winning of V.C. by Captain Bishop," was painted by Nevinson in the summer of 1918 for the Canadian War Memorials Fund, and is historically accurate even to the position of the two other aeroplanes when the victorious airman destroyed his first enemy, who is here shown crashing to ruin.



(images added)

Relief at Dawn by
Nevinson (1918)