

ABSTRACT

In 1919, immediately following the First World War, the English artist Percy Smith produced a series of seven etchings entitled *Dance of Death 1914-1918*. Contemporaries responded enthusiastically to his inventive treatment of the subject. This paper reinterprets the series in its historical and social context to better understand its original emotional impact.

During the war, censorship created a chasm between the home front and the Western Front. Towards the end of the conflict, soldiers began producing writings and visual art that presented an unfiltered image of the war, which an uneasy public began to crave. These frontline accounts brought the daily perils of the Tommies home, and contained what historian Samuel Hynes called the “aesthetic of direct experience.” This quality of authenticity became a prized ingredient in the public’s eye.

Smith illustrated his own military experience through the reimagining of a recognized Medieval trope. The series vicariously transports viewers to the front line, following Death as he meanders through the war zone, pausing here and there to either spare or collect a soldier. By conflating the factual with the macabre, Smith expanded the aesthetic of direct experience to expose not only the war’s physical trauma but its psychological toll.

Despite the War’s centennial and reinvigoration of scholarship on its art, Smith’s contributions have remained largely unstudied. My research draws heavily on unpublished archival material housed in the Percy Smith Foundation in Cheshunt, England, and early published sources.

*A Modern Dance with Death:
Percy Delf Smith and the Aesthetic of Direct Experience*

Clara Shaw
Senior Honors Thesis
Submitted to the Art History Department
Mount Holyoke College
April 2020

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A special thank you to the Mount Holyoke College Art History Department for supporting my research with the Linda Kelso Wright Fund. The trip to London proved to be integral to the gathering of resources and in my understanding of the material. Additionally, a warm thank you to the hospitality of Marion Delf, who gave me complete access to Percy Smith's papers and related archival material. The work done by Delf and her family in trying to revitalize the memory of Smith and his work is impressive and inspiring. I hope that this paper aids in some small way to bringing his work to light again.

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INTRODUCTION

I first saw Percy Delf Smith's *Dance of Death 1914-1918*, a portfolio of seven etchings, during a family tour of the Smith College Museum of Art in the winter of 2019. It was displayed as part of the show, *No Man's Land: Prints from the Front Lines of WWI*. I had been studying the war in anticipation of a yet undetermined senior honors thesis. Immediately, our eyes were drawn to the commanding and macabre images. We leaned in, absorbed by the poignant details and struck by the haunting presence of Death skillfully rendered next to British soldiers facing a variety of horrors. The sparse label read, "Percy Delf Smith." None of us had heard of him.

Percy Smith is a forgotten maverick, a skilled typographer, etcher, draftsman, designer, and painter. Although steadily gaining more recognition thanks to the diligent work of the Percy Smith Foundation and the recent centennial of the First World War, Smith remains little studied. While making sporadic appearances in articles and museum websites, his artwork is essentially absent in mainstream scholarship. His impactful contribution to the visual culture of World War I deserves reconsideration today.

This paper aims to study the *Dance of Death 1914-1918* within the context of its initial impact, when Smith's series was praised across Europe and America in the 1920s. The interpretive lens, "the aesthetic of direct experience," is borrowed from Samuel Hynes's scholarship on British culture and WWI.¹ Though a modern term, it was a quality that was immensely valued by the British public during and immediately after the war. Its primary

¹ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 166.

characteristics are truth and authenticity. In a time when the reality of the war was being intentionally hidden from the British public, art became an illuminative tool. Soldiers and veterans began conveying their true experiences through images. The public's favorable response to soldier art produced the popular Official War Artist movement. Smith's series succinctly fits within that cultural phenomena and should be incorporated into its scholarship.

This paper addresses how Smith effectively communicated his own aesthetic of experience through the vehicle of a well-known medieval trope. A comparison with other contemporary war art and the larger Dance of Death tradition explores the elements of Smith's success. The *Dance of Death 1914-1918* conveys the soldier's experience on a more intimate level than other well-received works. The series vicariously transports viewers to the front line, which Smith populated with a well-known personification of fear, terror, and sorrow. Smith visualizes the pervasiveness of those feelings in the minds of the soldier. In doing so, he brought a particularly powerful vehicle for empathy to an inexperienced home front. By conflating the factual with the macabre, Smith expanded the aesthetic of direct experience to expose not only the war's physical trauma but also its psychological toll.

This study strives to perceive Smith's series through the eyes of its contemporaries, which necessitated a reliance on published and unpublished primary sources. Original art reviews of the work were of utmost importance, filling a critical gap in scholarship. These articles not only shed light on how Smith's work was viewed, but also how it related to other war works. Smith's purpose was to bring the Western Front home by engaging the aesthetic of experience. Consequently, the voices of real soldiers have been added whenever applicable. These quotations come largely from the on-site exhibitions, archives, and the online collections

of the Imperial War Museum, London. Additionally, Smith's personal archival material was consulted. Especially useful were his war diary, pre-war sketchbooks, and post-war diaries, as well as his various published writings after the war. Smith's unpublished biography by his wife Dr. Ellen Marion Delf also proved essential. Together, these sources helped form an image of Smith as a whole person, revealing him to be a sensitive man with a passion for creating.

The secondary scholarship is split into two areas of focus: art and culture of Britain in the First World War, and the Dance of Death both in its medieval and nineteenth century incarnations. Of the war scholarship, the most important source has been Hynes' *A War Imagined*.² Hynes focuses on the change in art and literature during the war and how this new content was received through to the post-war period. His interdisciplinary approach influenced my thinking in this paper.

Sue Malvern's book *Modern Art, Britain and the Great War: Witnessing, Testimony and Remembrance* was helpful in understanding the history and content of the Official War Artist campaign.³ James Fox's scholarship on the relationship between the British public and art was particularly illuminating.⁴ It is worth noting that his study was also colored by Hynes and he too makes mention of the "aesthetic of direct experience." Fox also references the scholarship of Malvern.

Of the scholarship relating to the Dance of Death, two books were consulted most; Elina Gertsman's *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance* and Sarah Webster Goodwin's *Kitsch and Culture: The Dance of Death in Nineteenth-Century Literature*

² Hynes, *A War Imagined* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 166.

³ Although unused in this paper, her discussion on the interplay between modernism and tradition was inspiring.

⁴ James Fox, *British Art and the First World War, 1914-1924*, (Cambridge: University Printing House, 2015), and James Fox, "Conflict and Consolation, British Art and the First World War," *Art History*, 36, no. 4, (2013), 811-831.

and Graphic Arts. Gerstman explored how the tradition of the Dance was perceived by the public. Goodwin was helpful in locating the trope within the British collective consciousness.

The various sources result in a play of cultural studies and art history. This approach was the most complete way to understand a series that was intended to address a certain population at a specific moment in time.

Biography

The first section introduces the reader to Percy Smith. It begins with a brief discussion of his artistic education and career before the war. The bulk of the chapter explores Smith's year and a half in France during the conflict. Here, the reader is introduced to elements of the soldier experience that will continue to be referenced throughout the paper. The section ends with a brief summation of Smith's post-war years. The segment is minimal but serves to establish certain characteristics within Smith that are pertinent to the study of his series.

Series Analysis

The second section introduces the series as a whole. It establishes some defining characteristics within Smith's artistic style and the series in general. The segment also introduces some interpretive arguments which reappear later in the text.

The British Public and the Aesthetic of Experience

The third section presents the concept of the aesthetic of experience. It begins with a discussion of the British people's relationship to art at the start of the war. The section establishes that the aesthetic of experience became a way through which the public eagerly understood the war. It

looks at film, poetry, and finally visual art in relation to this interpretive lens. The segment culminates with the 1919-1920 *Nation's War Paintings* exhibition in London, which reinforces the British public's valuation of the soldier experience within fine art.

Smith's Aesthetic of Experience

This section discusses how Smith conveyed his aesthetic of experience in the backdrop of other artists and in a post-war world. It introduces Smith's personal goal for the series. The section also identifies the primary differences in Smith's depiction of his wartime experience and those of the Official War Artists. Reactions to Smith's series are explored here and discussed in relation to the post-war environment. Through this chapter, the reader is further acclimated to the English understanding of the war and its memory.

The British Public and the Dance of Death

This section explores why Smith chose to use the Dance of Death to convey the aesthetic of experience. The tradition of the Dance is discussed from its medieval origins to the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Particular attention is given to public interaction with and understanding of the theme. The section further explains the British public's familiarity with medievalism both before the war and after.

Smith's Dance of Death

The penultimate section discusses how Smith adapted the Dance to convey the unique experiences of the First World War soldier. There are comparisons with several nineteenth

century Dances of Death as well as Holbein's seminal adaptation. The section identifies two primary changes and explores how these manipulations helped Smith convey the soldier experience and aid his goal of inspiring empathy.

Catalogue: *The Dance of Death 1914-1918*

Each print is given a visual analysis accompanied by information on the production and/or reception of the individual print. To reinforce the importance of the soldier experience, most analyses are supported by quotes from actual servicemen. Each entry is meant to be a culmination of all the terms and concepts relayed in the paper.

BIOGRAPHY

Percy John Smith (later Percy Delf Smith) was born in South London on March 11, 1882.

⁵ There, he attended school until age fourteen, the compulsory length. Smith's workbook from those formative years shows an early affinity for art. On the pages, above equations and lines of script, he wrote the subjects in beautiful calligraphy. Above the ornate headings, he drew scenes of barnyard animals, his classroom, and bored classmates. For a boy lacking formal art training, these vignettes are impressive in their modelling and perspective.

Complying with Victorian tradition, Smith left school to apprentice for the furniture designer Frederick Staddon in London. However, being more interested in fine arts, he left the trade and enrolled in the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in 1900. He remained there cultivating his typographical skills until he surpassed his peers. Four years into his education, Smith replaced his teacher upon his retirement and began a career as a lecturer.

Aligning with the natural talent expressed in his early sketches, Smith remained largely self-taught in drawing and painting. While in London, Smith studied illuminated manuscripts at the British Museum. However, between 1909 and 1914, Smith expanded his education and traveled across Europe to learn from the works of the Old Masters. Sketchbooks from these trips track his artistic inspirations. The notebooks list dozens of works, mostly drawings, from the museums he visited. From a diary likely dated from 1912, among the most cited artists are Andrea Mantegna, Rembrandt, and Jean-Francois Millet.

⁵ Smith later incorporated his wife's name, Delf, into his. Percy Delf Smith is how he is currently referred to in museum collections.

Smith's wife, Dr. Ellen Marion Delf, revealed in her unpublished biography of Smith that he became interested in etching around 1910, inspired by the work of Rembrandt.⁶ He purchased his own printing press that year and began creating etchings based on drawings he had made while traveling.⁷ In addition to the work of Rembrandt, Millet was a major influence.⁸ The pre-war sketchbooks not only list works by Millet, but also include diagrams of them where Smith recorded every use of shadow and light. Although the sketches are uncaptioned, the books are filled with studies of field workers, some wielding scythes, which may be after works by Millet (Figure 1).⁹

Although raised in the Wesleyan Methodist faith, Smith was never interested in organized religion.¹⁰ Instead, he lived by a personally developed set of beliefs that centered around a unity with nature, companions, and the appreciation of one's surroundings. This self-governing principle is manifest in two books. The first is *Quality in Life*, written by Smith in 1913 but not published until 1919. Smith defined quality as "that enrichment of consciousness which comes of a full inflowing and out-flowing of experience... [it] is born of awareness,

⁶ From this point on, Dr Delf will be referred to as Delf. This is not to be confused with Smith's later incorporation of her name. Delf met Smith while she was a lecturer in botany at Westfield College in London. They married in 1928. Her work at Westfield was integral in obtaining the college's recognition of the discipline of botany. Because Westfield was a women's college, Delf had to overcome meager departmental resources and funds. After Smith's death in 1948, Delf dedicated herself to promoting the life and work of her husband. Marion Delf, *A Record of the Great War: A Catalogue of Etchings, Drypoints & Sketches from World War One*, (London: The Percy Smith Foundation, 2018), 2.

⁷ Dr. Ellen Marion Delf, *Biography of Percy John Delf Smith*, (unpublished), unpaginated.

⁸ Elizabeth Brown, *Percy John Smith (1882-1948): Why was he the only English Artist of the First World War to use the Medieval Trope, the Dance of Death?*, (unpublished thesis, date and issuing institution unknown), 15. The Percy Smith Foundation provided me with a copy of the manuscript.

⁹ Respect for Millet exceeded his skill as an artist. Smith became influenced by his personal philosophies as well. For instance, Smith begins his book on lettering with a quote by Millet, "Beauty is the fit, appropriate, the serviceable character well rendered." Delf, *Biography*.

¹⁰ E. Delf, *Biography*, unpaginated.

nourished by receiving and giving.”¹¹ Although his beliefs, like many others, were challenged by the war, Smith nevertheless remained faithful to this concept of a reciprocal existence.¹²

The second work is *Credo*, written by Smith’s friend T. J. Cobden Sanderson. Smith presented this book to his wife after the war as the summation of his beliefs. Like *Quality in Life*, it calls for an awareness and appreciation of experience. *Credo* states, “let each man stand up and see & witness to it [the world]! ... To the uttermost rim, then, push the Vision of to-day, see it, be it, live it, then die to give place to the minds yet to be born.”¹³ Smith understood art to be a vital part of his philosophy, stating “art invites to an enlargement of experience, a linking-up of ourselves with a greater unity.”¹⁴ According to Delf, mindfully striving to live to these standards of gratefulness and communion filled her husband with a “joie de vivre.”¹⁵

By the outbreak of the war, Smith was distinguished in the typographic world. He was a lecturer at two schools, founder of the Roman Lettering Company, and had taken design commissions. For example, he created the lettering for the new County Hall in Westminster. At age thirty-three, Smith was older than most men volunteering at the start of the war. Although the minimum age was eighteen, optimism was at such a height that in the first few months of the war, nearly 300,000 of the half million volunteers were underage.¹⁶ Smith attempted to enlist in 1915, a year before conscription became a mandate. Like many Britons at that time, Smith believed he was obliged to assist Britain in her duty. He tried to enlist twice but was rejected

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ T.J. Cobden Sanderson, *Credo*, (unknown publisher, unknown date), unpaginated.

¹⁴ Percy Smith, “A Sermon,” *Sermons by Artists*, (London: Golden Cockerel Press, 1934), 80.

¹⁵ E. Delf, *Biography*, unpaginated.

¹⁶ Marion Delf, great niece of Smith, during a conversation suggested that Smith felt uneasy around these boisterous young men. Smith makes reference to this incompatibility in his diary, “Too much talk in the dugout – at least too much of short-sighted arguments one gets.” Percy Smith, *War Diary*, 1916, 4. For a discussion of recruitment and conscription see, “Recruitment to the British Army During the First World War,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recruitment_to_the_British_Army_during_the_First_World_War

because of a pre-existing hernia.¹⁷ However, after receiving corrective surgery, Smith was finally accepted into the Royal Marines Artillery on January 1, 1916.

Smith was registered as a ‘sapper’ in the Howitzer Brigade. As a sapper, he was responsible for digging trenches, a labor-intensive task for which he was completely unfit. However, despite his age, Smith’s state level education made him ineligible to become an officer. In addition to constantly “trenching,” Smith had to pack the entire camp when ready for relocation, stand watch for four hours in the dead of night, and fill huge shell holes along the roads.¹⁸ In his war diary, Smith frequently records being bored and tired. Delf reveals that Smith preferred to refer to himself as a gunner. He was enamored with the powerful 15” Howitzer that the Brigade operated. Nicknamed the “Granny,” it was the biggest Allied gun, capable of firing a 1,400 pound shell 10,795 yards. In awe of the gun’s “precision and power,” Smith began sketching it as soon as he saw it during training at Eastney Barracks in England (Figure 2).¹⁹

While Smith was never sent to the front lines, it would be a mistake to underestimate the daily hazards of the Western Front. “Random death” was a constant threat.²⁰ Even for those not on their week-long stint in the front line, there was always danger of being hit by a shell or a sniper. Just the proximity to the continuous threat and noise of the bombardments caused severe psychological distress. One soldier wrote home, “It is very hard to endure the bombs, father. It will be difficult for anyone to survive and come back safe and sound from the war.”²¹ Smith’s

¹⁷ Dr Joanna Meacock, “Grim Reflections on WWI: Percy Smith’s ‘Dance of Death’,” in *Scottish Society for Art History Newsletter* no. 15, winter 2015-2016, 10.

¹⁸ Percy Delf Smith, *War Diary*, 1916-1917, 4.

¹⁹ E. Delf, *Biography*, unpaginated.

²⁰ Phil Dutton, *Fighting in the Trenches*, Imperial War Museum, video, 4:08, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/learning/resources/fighting-in-the-trenches>.

²¹ Unknown, Audio installation, First World War Galleries, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom, January 2020.

war diary records nearly unceasing bombardment. One day, while on a cable laying expedition, Smith wrote that his and a neighboring group were spotted by Germans. The enemy quickly launched several bombs landing mere yards from Smith. Within seconds, four men were killed and six left wounded.

Like many new recruits, Smith's first introduction to the war was the Battle of the Somme. From July to November around one million men were killed and untold numbers wounded along the river. Arriving in late October, Smith was surrounded by the grim remnants of attempts to gain German land. Smith's first war series, *Twelve Drypoints of the War*, records the "lunar landscape" of the Somme and the nearby town, Thiepval, which had just been obliterated the month before Smith arrived.²²

In this "hot" area, death was inseparable from the landscape. Private Donald A. Hodge recalled that the area was "the only place ... that they [bodies] had been piled up as almost like trenches."²³ It is possible that some of Smith's duties were to collect these bodies and their parts for burial.²⁴ While recounting his own experience digging trenches at Ypres, Private Hodge describes the land as "saturated with bodies" and reveals that frequently his "spade would strike a body."²⁵ While trenching day after day, Smith probably uncovered fallen soldiers although no mention of it is made in his war diary.

Smith was in France during the coldest winter of the war. Men slept with their bread to keep it from freezing, Smith's watercolors became ice, and he records that a driver froze to death

²² EG Williams, interview by Graham Maddocks, *Williams, E.G. (Oral History)*, Imperial War Museum, reel 2, 27:06, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80023045>.

²³ Donald A Hodge, interview by Lyn Smith, *Hodge, Donald A (Oral History)*, Imperial War Museum, reel 5, 1:37, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80030348>.

²⁴ M. Delf, *A Record of the Great War*, (London: Percy Smith Foundation, 2018), 14.

²⁵ Hodge, reel 5, 27:37.

while sleeping in his car.²⁶ As a result, the ground was frequently too hard to dig, allotting Smith free time to explore and sketch abandoned trenches, devastated towns, and the surrounding land. It is likely that Smith's personal understanding of nature and one's interaction with it compelled him to constantly draw and paint while stationed in France.²⁷ Smith's dedication to documenting his "inflowing and out-flowing of experience" is evidenced by diary entries like the one dated January 4, 1917: "'Trenching' as usual. No shelling. Went over Thiepval hill. Thiepval simply a heap of rubbish decorated by gaunt tree trunks. *Must sketch it.*" [italics added]²⁸ However, his compulsion to record aroused suspicion. Only Official War Artists were allowed to sketch. Other soldier artists were frequently accused of being spies.

Since basic training at Eastney, Smith had been repeatedly reprimanded for sketching. On January 22 1917, Smith's sketchbooks were briefly confiscated. After their contents were deemed safe, Smith went to the Commanding Officer and obtained official permission to continue drawing. Afterwards, the CO asked Smith to draw his men and even asked for a copy of the work. Smith's final entry for that day exemplifies his easy nature and absolute dedication to drawing: "So my 'arrest' procured me a dinner and perhaps a client! Sketched very roughly a view of the valley of the Ancre from just below the Thiepval road on my way back."²⁹

Smith's work was not only allowed but frequently requested. His war diary records several "commissions." On a less official spectrum, he completed sketches and paintings for his comrades. On one occasion, Smith was asked to do a painting of a Captain Williams's grave, which was to be sent to his wife. Smith reported that it was "not a very attractive subject – but

²⁶ Williams, reel 2. 1:48 & Smith, *War Diary*, 7&9.

²⁷ E. Delf, *Biography*, unpaginated.

²⁸ E. Delf, *Biography*, unpaginated. & Smith, *War Diary*, 4.

²⁹ Smith, *War Diary*, 6.

worth doing for widows sake.”³⁰ Additionally, he designed the lettering for Williams’s grave marker. Smith was asked at least once more to capture the final resting place of a fallen comrade.³¹ His talent was also enlisted for official military matters. For instance, at least once Smith was asked to accompany an expedition and make sketches of German gun positions.³² However, his biggest “commission” was drawing an instruction manual for the complex assembly of the 15” Howitzer (Figure 3).

By the summer of 1917, Smith was no longer able to complete his duties as a soldier. His wife reveals that when able, his peers would complete his digging after finishing their own. Smith was hospitalized for a rupture of his hernia caused by the strenuous work and was released on leave to Southampton, England in June 1917. Smith left France in the first days of the Battle of Messines, a victory for the British army which cost them 24,562 men over the course of twelve days. The last entry of his war diary is dated June 6th, the day before the battle:

I’m tired – too tired to feel disposed to write much... We have the biggest concentration of guns yet arranged. The Somme will be small as compared with what this will be in a few hours – after that – home – if all’s well.³³

It was in Southampton that Smith completed his *Drypoint* series and began work on his series, *Dance of Death 1914-1918*. Some of the drypoints were completed on the field using a gramophone needle and copper plates that his family smuggled to him inside magazines. Concerning the *Dance*, Delf reveals that Smith considered the medieval theme while in France. However, he was unable to begin work until he had access to a manipulable skeleton, which he found at the Southampton Art Club. Smith first made small sketches of the series, then full-sized

³⁰ Smith, *War Diary*, 13.

³¹ Smith, *War Diary*, 17.

³² Smith, *War Diary*, 12.

³³ Smith, *War Diary*, 19.

drawings. These preliminary drawings, however, were not always followed. Smith would work on the plates while looking at “notes of detail made in France.”³⁴ While Smith never went back to the Front, in April 1918 he was asked to complete a course to become a cartographer for the Ordnance Survey Department in England. Smith was officially demobilized in February 1919, and the Colnaghi Gallery published the *Dance* in that same year.

Smith continued to have a varied and successful career until his death in 1948. His biggest commitments immediately after the war included his *Wuthering Heights* drypoint series and lettering commissions. His largest design commission was for the 11,285 names of Canadian soldiers presumed dead or missing on the Vimy Ridge Memorial, which took him several years to complete. Smith continued his work in typography and calligraphy, starting his own lettering practice, the Dorian Studio. He became a leading figure in the revival of the art of lettering. After the war, Smith felt a need for “brotherly love” and joined several organizations like the Freemasons and the Art Workers Guild in search of “good fellowship.”³⁵ This search for unity, which adheres to his long standing personal philosophy, was probably strengthened by the war, in both the relationships it created as well as those it destroyed.³⁶

The *Dance* was republished in 1921 by the Print Collectors Quarterly and gained both public and critical acclaim. One hundred portfolios were reprinted and sold both as a set and individually. The series was promoted in periodicals such as *The Connoisseur* and *The Studio*. The British Museum, the National Gallery of Wales, and the Victoria and Albert Museum all

³⁴ Ernest Lumsden, *The Art of Etching* (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1962), 354.
https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/qtRkDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0

³⁵ E. Delf, *Biography*, unpaginated.

³⁶ E. Delf in the *Biography* also supports that Smith was concerned with the “need for human understanding (‘connections’).” For an example of Smith’s self-professed appreciation of unity read his essay in *Sermons by Artists*.

acquired the series. The seven prints appeared in several exhibitions in England, and one print was even shown in the Louvre in 1927. In 1930, a combination of Smith's war drypoints and *Dance* etchings were published in *Sixteen Drypoints and Etchings: A Record of the Great War*.

Smith's sense of duty never left him. As soon as the Second World War was declared, Smith registered at age fifty-seven to become an Air Raid Warden. As tensions with Germany rose for a second time, the *Dance of Death* regained popularity as its subject became meaningful once again.

SERIES ANALYSIS

The proper published sequence of the seven plates of the *Dance of Death 1914-1918* are: *Death Forbids*, *Death Marches*, *Death Awed*, *Death Refuses*, *Death Waits*, *Death Ponders*, and *Death Intoxicated* (Figures 4-10).³⁷ Each print is a vehicle transporting viewers to the Western Front. There, they witness the horrors of the conflict. The images follow Death as he meanders around the battlefield like a morbid tour guide. Each etching lingers on one horrific moment and the viewer watches to see if Death will spare or collect the soldier. The seventh image, however, stands out. In contrast to the six still moments, this scene depicts the heat of battle. Death dances gleefully while a British soldier rushes to bayonet a German. The series thus ends with empathy for the Hun as well as the Tommy. Many soldiers on both sides felt this sympathy. Private Hodge recalls that, “On the whole we were sorry for the Germans as we were for ourselves. We knew we were in the same boat.”³⁸

Smith etched the series with a gramophone needle fixed to a wooden holder with sealing-wax, a method which he started to use on the battlefield. He described the result as “smooth and yet sharp,” qualities which lent themselves to the duality of the gentle and the harsh, the beautiful and the horrid which Smith appreciated.³⁹ Delf comments on Smith’s paradoxical nature in her biography, “This [his repeated motif of a joyous Pan] always seemed to me in strange contrast with his love of the austere landscape of the Bronte moor... or the

³⁷ Prospectus for *The Dance of Death 1914-1918: Seven Etchings by Percy Smith* (Woodgreen: The Print Society, 1921), unpaginated.

³⁸ Hodge, reel 9, 3:80.

³⁹ Lumsden, *The Art of Etching*, 354.

fascination of the powerful gun he served in 1916 in France, an exhilaration felt when it was fired, in spite of his awareness of the devastation caused.”⁴⁰ Smith also expresses his dual aesthetics throughout his war diary. For instance, Smith described the devastated Ancre valley as “strangely beautiful.”⁴¹ Then again, while looking up at the night sky lit with “flashes like incessant sheet lightning” he confessed, “The continuous lights along the front [are] very awesome and exhilarating – tho [sic] indeed I feel at the same time we ought not be exalted – but rather depressed at the astonishing sight to be seen.”⁴²

The series visualizes this same juxtaposition of austerity and beauty, morbidity and empathy. The scenes, though troubling and at times disturbing, are harmoniously composed. For instance, *Death Awed* presents a barren landscape in which Death stares at a pair of feet which have been severed from their body by some kind of artillery fire (Figure 6). The horror of the scene is somehow aestheticized by the minimalistic setting and the mirroring of the forms. Additionally, the figure of Death, though grim, is lyrically posed. His hand delicately lifts and his shroud rhythmically accentuated his gestures. Smith’s treatment of the terrors of the war is markedly different from those by artists like Otto Dix who in their war series express trauma through equally troubling imagery and style. Instead, Smith continues to cling to idealized beauty, form, and movement.

The quality of Smith’s line was praised in the 1921 December issue of *The Connoisseur*, “Mr. Smith works with a fluent needle, attaining his results without apparent labour, and, while

⁴⁰ E. Delf, *Biography*, unpaginated. In his war diary, Smith also mentioned Bronte country. Something of his experience in France must have inspired him to record that landscape which he admired. Immediately after completing the *Dance of Death*, Smith began work on his Wuthering Heights series. Stafford Leak in his article, “War and Peace in the Etchings and Drawings of Percy Smith.” *The Bookman’s Journal* Vol 13, No. 54, (1926) suggests that Smith put more effort into his Bronte series than in his war series.

⁴¹ Smith, *War Diary*, 4.

⁴² Smith, *War Diary*, 15.

obtaining strong contrasts of light and shade, avoids any exaggeration or straining after meretricious effect.”⁴³ It is the variety of line and tone that make the works compelling. Strong, dark lines distinguish Smith’s foregrounds while the scenes are extended far into the distance by delicate strokes. In the case of *Death Forbids* and *Intoxicated*, these faint marks contain important detail (Figures 4 & 10). In the latter, they create a sea of war-crazed soldiers that, from a distance, become indistinguishable from the clouds of gas swirling behind Death. In this final print, Death emits his own deadly vapor that turns men into monsters.

The series could be split into two compositional groups that evoke different yet equally empathic reactions from the viewer. In *Death Marches*, *Awed*, *Ponders*, and *Intoxicated* the sky occupies the majority of the space (Figures 5, 6, 9, & 10). The ground is low and flat while the sky is expansive, like a Dutch landscape. In these four prints, Death is more prominent than the soldiers. He is placed higher and is the only form standing out against the empty sky. In these scenes, the treatment of the figure of Death is similar to Smith’s tree “portraits” he completed while in France. As they did with many war artists, destroyed trees held special significance to Smith. Front-line experience equated broken trees with a soldier’s physical and psychological destruction. David Jones, a soldier poet, wrote, “Wounded trees and wounded men are very much an abiding image in my mind as a hangover from the War.”⁴⁴ Smith imbued his trees with symbolic significance by placing them in the immediate foreground, silhouetted against a bleak sky (Figure 11). In the *Dance*, Death compositionally and symbolically replaces these solemn trees as he looms, thin and jagged, over the landscape.

⁴³ "The Dance of Death, 1914-1918' by Percy Smith," *The Connoisseur*, 61, no. 244 (December, 1921), 237.

⁴⁴ M. Delf, *A Record of the Great War*, 23.

The monumentality and eerie solemnity of Death in these scenes creates an otherworldliness which was likely inspired by Millet, one of Smith's main influences.⁴⁵ Millet isolates his peasants in the foreground by pushing all other details towards the horizon. In doing so, the laborers grow into monuments even as they hunch over the flat land (Figure 12).⁴⁶ By echoing Millet's composition, Smith also echoes his tone of solemnity, mystery and spirituality. Particularly *Death Awed* may be compared with Millet's enigmatic and celebrated *Angelus* (Figures 6 & 13). In both, the figures stand as solid, immovable cenotaphs whose psychological dismay is echoed by the bare landscape.

In the other works, *Death Forbids*, *Refuses*, and *Waits*, the ratio of sky to land is reversed (Figures 4, 7, & 8). In these three prints, the viewer is placed beside the soldiers and both lie in the mud, fully immersed in the scene. The focus is not on the loneliness of the landscape but rather the claustrophobic setting. The drypoint series provides us with references for these packed compositions. For instance, the focus on no-mans-land in *Death Forbids* and *Waits* is similar to earlier works like *The Ruins of Thiepval – Main Street* where a pedestrian walkway has been turned into a “sea of shell hole to shell hole”(Figure 14).⁴⁷ Likewise, the almost encompassing darkness of *Death Refuses* is similar to Smith's other interior scenes, like *Dreams on the Dugout* (Figure 15). These scenes place the viewer closest to Death.

Though there are at least two figures in every scene, Death's is the only face shown. Death appears frontally in *Death Waits* and in three quarter view in *Death Intoxicated* and *Awed* (Figures 8, 10, & 6). His empty eye-sockets are animated, establishing a personality. In contrast, the faces of the soldiers are always hidden and therefore their characters are unknown. Anytime a

⁴⁵ Brown, *Percy John Smith*, 15.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ EG Williams, reel, 2, 27:08.

soldier appears, he is either wearing a gasmask, is facing away from us, or is seen in a lost profile. Smith's pre-war sketchbooks show an interest in lost-profile. While in Luxembourg, Smith was particularly struck by Rodin's *Bellona*. The sculpture is one of the few works in his journals that inspired an impromptu sketch next to the entry. Of all the possible angles to capture, Smith chose a lost profile (Figure 16). This interest is recurrent in other studies throughout the sketchbook. Smith's decision to hide the faces of the soldiers is not one of necessity or lack of skill. Throughout Smith's career he made successful portraits. Even during the war, he recorded the faces of his comrades. So that begs the question, why create anonymous soldiers?

On the one hand, Smith removes any identity from the soldiers. This is not an uncommon decision by artists. It serves to express their widespread experiences. For instance, being stuck under a tree, as in *Death Forbids*, did not just happen to one soldier; similar predicaments were common across both Fronts (Figure 4). Smith shows the pervasiveness of feelings of fear, pain, and loneliness not just to him but to all soldiers, even in the enemy. Smith makes a statement about the existence on the Fronts that those at home cannot know about.

The elimination of a soldier's identity, however, also establishes Death as the protagonist of the series. The viewer experiences the Western Front not through the eyes of the soldier but through the actions of Death himself. Delf speaks briefly on this interesting adaptation of the trope, "Unlike the various 'Dances' of medieval times... the figure of Death [is shown] expressing its own imagined feelings, as indicated by the Seven titles and scenes."⁴⁸ Therefore, the viewer travels with Death across the Front just as the soldiers did. The viewer, while they may become separated from the soldier as in *Death Waits*, is never without the guidance of

⁴⁸ E. Delf, *Biography*, unpaginated.

Death (Figure 8). In this way, Smith visualizes the soldier's psychological understanding that death is always present.

Truthful accounts of wartime experiences were greatly valued by the British public during and after the First World War. The next section discusses this cultural phenomenon categorized by Hynes as the "aesthetic of direct experience."⁴⁹ This proved valuable in a period when truth was a contested and scarce entity. The voices of soldiers added an unsettling interpretation which has become the dominant way we conceptualize the war today.

⁴⁹ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 195.

THE BRITISH PUBLIC AND THE AESTHETIC OF EXPERIENCE

In *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, Samuel Hynes identifies a “new art” arising from the conflict. According to Hynes, this new visual culture “cast off the traditions of war ... in an effort to reduce, to limit, to confine themselves to bare, ruined reality.”⁵⁰ Gone were the sweeping panoramas of rushing cavalry and billowing clouds of gun smoke. In their place stood empty landscapes riddled with shell holes whose stagnant waters reflected the bombardment overhead. Confident generals atop noble steeds were replaced by soldiers slumped over with the weight of their disillusionment. From these revolutionary images, Hynes extracts “the aesthetic of direct experience” as their defining characteristic.⁵¹ For Hynes, genuine and moving records of the war could only be created by those artists who had served. His conclusion parallels the sentiments of the British public. Over the course of the four-year conflict, the home front recognized an irreplaceable authenticity in artwork created by combatants.

During the First World War, the English formed a special relationship with visual culture. Images became a constant source of information, comfort, protest, and finally a vehicle of commemoration and closure. However, in 1914 the art world nearly disappeared.⁵² In the previous century, the British art market had disregarded the desires of the public, convinced that they had no taste and therefore no consequence. After war was declared, to continue spending time and money on something so removed from reality seemed “trivial, unethical, and

⁵⁰ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 166.

⁵¹ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 195.

⁵² Fox, *British Art*, 8.

unpatriotic.”⁵³ Resources needed to be directed elsewhere. Art Historian James Fox, in his discussion of art and the British public, asserts that those artists who stayed home painting instead of fighting were considered “profiteers rather than patriots and as shirkers rather than soldiers.”⁵⁴

British artists realized that their relevance and survival depended upon the approval of the general public. As a result, they began to address societal needs.⁵⁵ Initially, this meant escapism. As the war raged on, home life steadily worsened. Entire towns could lose half of their population in one day. Wives kept families afloat with meager wages and government support. Staple materials became scarce and the average portion of food was greatly lessened. The production of bucolic landscapes commonly referred to as “Peace Pictures” helped to provide a distraction.⁵⁶ Fox identifies the success of these images in their ability to transport the viewer back to a pre-industrial, pre-war England. He says that some artists went a step further and created “deliberately timeless arcadias.”⁵⁷ Of these, Fox identifies Tom Mostyn’s *The Garden of Peace* as particularly popular (Figure 17). Mostyn’s picture was an escapist masterpiece. Its entire composition, the golden sunset, the sparkling water, and the embracing couple were all so fantastical that it allowed the viewer to briefly go somewhere separate from any reality they knew. These tranquil images which were disseminated to the British public through periodicals - a lithograph of Mostyn’s work was available for one shilling - diverted attention away from the conflict across the Channel and the hardships at home.⁵⁸

⁵³ Fox, *British Art*, 9.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Fox, “Conflict and Consolation, British Art and the First World War,” *Art History*, 36, no. 4, (2013), 814.

⁵⁶ Fox, “Conflict and Consolation,” 812.

⁵⁷ Fox, “Conflict and Consolation,” 814

⁵⁸ Fox, “Conflict and Consolation,” 812- 815. Read for further discussion on the public’s relation to art that specifically aided their trauma.

The bucolic images helped to establish a visible nationalism that became mobilized against the threat of German *kultur*. Stuart Sillars in his exploration of this crafted “Englishness” identifies a “very powerful awareness of tradition” which pervaded this period of national art.⁵⁹ He identifies medieval stone churches, thatched roofs, and giant elm trees as popular iconography that became “emblems of social continuity.”⁶⁰ These motifs appear in George Clausen’s *The Wish* which was particularly popular among civilians and soldiers (Figure 18).⁶¹ Such nostalgia-inducing images presented a quaint English civilization which was in direct contrast to German *kultur* described by Fox as, “a cold, homogenous and state-driven cultural model intent on world domination.”⁶²

An important shift in public demands occurred as “war fever” spread across England.⁶³ Artists began creating what Fox dubs “war pictures,” which included depictions of generals, battlefields, and ruined towns.⁶⁴ These were presented to the public in window displays appropriately named, “war-windows” and were available on postcards, prints, photographs, and even matchbox holders (Figure 19).⁶⁵ However, Fox asserts that a more common way to “see” the war was through photographs and illustrations reproduced in the press. The phenomena of visual reportage was a product of the previous century. By 1900, *Punch*, *Illustrated London News*, *Illustrated Police News* and *The Sphere* had all entered circulation and conditioned the public to see their news as well as read it. When WWI began, Fox maintains that audiences held

⁵⁹ Stuart Sillars, “Icons of Englishness: tradition and development in the arts of the Great War,” *Critical Quarterly*, 23, no. 2, 1981, 51.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-8705.1981.tb01825.x>

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Fox, “Conflict and Consolation,” 816.

⁶² Fox, *British Art*, 56.

⁶³ Fox, “Conflict and Consolation,” 812.

⁶⁴ Fox, *British Art*, 82 & 85.

⁶⁵ Fox *British Art*, 86.

the same expectations, wanting views of the conflict. Publishers responded through new periodicals like the *War Pictorial* and *Illustrated War News*. The public received a daily inflow of photographs, cartoons, and sketches of the front lines.⁶⁶

While paintings, posters, and news photography and illustration provided the public with an image of the war, it was not a truthful one. Official censorship consciously blinded the English public to the war's realities. The Defense of the Realm Act (DORA), established several days after Britain entered the conflict in 1914, enforced censorship of anything deemed "likely to cause disaffection or alarm among any of His Majesty's forces or among the civilian population."

⁶⁷ This mandated the official examination of letters, news reports, and even art. Additionally, many enacted self-censorship out of fear of retribution or of causing concern.

The gulf created between the truth and the public was commented on by an anonymous soldier writing for *The Bystander*'s segment, "Mud, Blood, and Khaki" in 1915,

... let me give you this tip straight from the front — believe nothing of what you read regarding the actual firing line... Even pursue skeptically those letters from the trenches that form so large a part of the literature daily offered you... nor would I advise you to place too much reliance upon the pictures with which your eyes are dazzled day by day.⁶⁸

Under the heading, "Things are not as they are pictured!," the anonymous soldier reveals several misconceptions encouraged by official reports. His most shocking claim is that there can be no accurate battle pictures. First, he explains, because there are no actual battles. He continues by noting that there are no press photographers, correspondents, or artists on the firing lines. He quips that the press photographer would have "gone to swell the Great Soul-list long before he

⁶⁶ Fox, *British Art*, 84-86. For a discussion on war fever and a more elaborate exploration of the importance of photography in war news read Fox's chapter.

⁶⁷ "Defence of the Realm Act," *Wikipedia*, last accessed 4/5/2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defence_of_the_Realm_Act_1914.

⁶⁸ An Officer on Leave, "Some Truths from the Front," *The Bystander*, 1915, last accessed January 2020, <https://www.illustratedfirstworldwar.com/the-titles/the-bystander/about-the-bystander/>.

had had time to press his pneumatic bulb.”⁶⁹ In short, the front line was too dangerous for civilians. The absence of reporters resulted in inaccuracies that morphed into myths. According to this soldier, the most annoying misrepresentation were those images showing men with their heads above the trenches, a feature which he mocks.⁷⁰ Similarly, he notes the absence of nurses on the front lines. This remark directly contradicted many Red Cross posters showing a heroic nurse dragging a wounded soldier off the battlefield or holding him in imitation of a pietà. While these details may seem trivial, they argue for the impossibility of an outsider understanding or depicting the war.

The anonymous soldier makes one important exception to his dismissal of visual reportage: those accounts made from “Eye Witnesses.”⁷¹ From the inception of the war, the press had advertised for “witness images.”⁷² The ability to claim absolute authenticity became a valuable selling point. The papers would emphasize the legitimacy of their images by writing captions like, “Real Sketches by Real Soldiers.”⁷³ However, even these guarantees could not be fully trusted; professional artists continued to produce images safely in England with the captions, “drawn on the spot.”⁷⁴ Despite such fraudulent claims, it is clear that the public’s voracity for an “aesthetic of direct experience” actively encouraged its production. Fox proclaims that these captions were placed in order to mimic the perceived inherent truth of photography. This “photographic looking” taught the British public to look at works of art not as

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ “Soldiers may be, and often are, *extremely* ignorant men, but the number of raving lunatics in any of the armies in the field is, statistics assure me, comparatively small.” Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Fox, *British Art*, 94.

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Ibid

representations of events but as the real thing itself.⁷⁵ Therefore, the public could experience the war vicariously by looking “through” the images. This way of seeing makes it even more important that the accounts be truthful.

The sense of urgency for accurate portrayals of the war escalated during the year 1916.⁷⁶ The events surrounding the infamous Battle of the Somme provide a telling case study. On the first day, July 1, 1916, British forces suffered 57,470 casualties, which included 19,240 fatalities. The next day, the front page of *The Sunday Pictorial* reassuringly reported, “All goes well for Britain and France.” Photographs of heroic guns and smiling Tommies accompanied the headline (Figure 20). For a month, newspapers continued to shield the damage done to Allied forces, while the number of casualties continued to rise. This contradiction is exemplified by the *Journal*'s report on July 10, "Over the past week, the conduct of the war on every front has favoured the Allies," while readers turning the page confronted four broadsheet columns of casualties.⁷⁷ Faith in the official, sanitized version of modern warfare steadily eroded as thousands of families across England received the dreaded telegram.

Just in time to quell concerns about censorship, the British Topical Committee for War Films released the feature length documentary, *The Battle of the Somme*. The film premiered in London on August 21, while the battle was still being fought. It is estimated that it drew an audience of twenty million, half of whom saw it within the first six weeks.⁷⁸ The medium of film

⁷⁵ Fox, *British Art*, 92. For more on news photography read Fox's chapter “War pictures: truth, fiction, function.”

⁷⁶ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 167. Hynes admits that to say the art world changed in 1916 is an oversimplification, however, both he and Fox maintain that it is a helpful interpretive viewpoint.

⁷⁷ Greg Watson, “Battle of the Somme: How Britain learned the truth,” *BBC News*, July 3, 2016, last accessed 4/5/2020

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-36149839>.

⁷⁸ Ibid & Nicholas Hiley, “The Battle of the Somme (film),” *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, (Berlin, Freie Universität Berlin, 2015)

https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/the_battle_of_the_somme_film

carried the highest sense of authenticity and the footage was both eye-opening and shocking, especially the scenes of dead soldiers. The reaction of the public was so visceral that one cinema manager refused to show the movie and posted, "We are not showing *The Battle of the Somme*. This is a place of amusement, not a chamber of horrors."⁷⁹ Disturbing or not, the film was praised. *The Manchester Guardian* reported that the people have seen "the real thing at last."⁸⁰ Through the camera lens, the public was brought unprecedentedly close to the reality behind the headlines and they valued it.

War poetry also provided the British public with a glimpse of reality. In 1916, the soldier-poet Siegfried Sassoon was one of the leaders of what Hynes calls a "new" poetry. Like the new art, these works depended upon the honest description of a soldier's experience. Perhaps out of necessity, these poems carried a level of social and political critique. While portraying the soldier's experience, they also exposed the government's misconduct and the public's complacency. His poem *The Hero*, published in *Cambridge Magazine* in November 1916, illustrates the divide censorship created:

"Jack fell as he'd have wished," the Mother said,
 And folded up the letter that she'd read.
 "The Colonel writes so nicely." Something broke
 In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
 She half looked up. "We mothers are so proud
 Of our dead soldiers." Then her face was bowed.

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
 He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
 That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.
 For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
 Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
 Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

⁷⁹ Hiley, "The Battle of the Somme,"
https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/the_battle_of_the_somme_film

⁸⁰ Fox, *British Art*, 91. Of course we now know that several scenes were faked.

He thought how "Jack," cold-footed, useless swine,
 Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
 Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
 To get sent home; and how, at last, he died,
 Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
 Except that lonely woman with white hair.⁸¹

The last two stanzas of the poem contrast the myth of the war with its pathetic reality. The mother's heroic image of her son as "brave" and "glorious" is juxtaposed with his panicked attempt to at first be discharged and then to flee. Even the soldier's death is not granted any illusions of glory, instead Sassoon bluntly asserts that Jack was "blown to small bits." The Brother Officer represents the truth whose understanding of the war is markedly distinct from the civilians and the military who are represented by the letter of condolence. The reality of the war can only be expressed by the man who had been in the trenches with Jack. He addresses the uselessness of the sacrifice by acknowledging that no one, especially the government, cares about the loss of life.

The conscious hiding of the soldier's experience was an important issue to Sassoon. In 1917, he wrote an official letter of protest regarding the problem. It was read in the House of Commons and printed in *The Times*. It explicitly admonishes the ignorance of the British public:

I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust ... On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard *the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise.*⁸² (italics added)

The last line of his protest makes it clear that the British public had no other way of knowing what was actually happening. Like the mother in the poem, many still believed that heroes

⁸¹ Siegfried Sassoon, "The Hero," *poets.org*, last accessed 4/5/2020, <https://poets.org/poem/hero>.

⁸² "Sassoon's protest, "A Soldier's Declaration," written on June 15, 1917," *Anthem for Doomed Youth: Writers and Literature of The Great War, 1914-1918*, last accessed 4/5/2020 <http://exhibits.lib.byu.edu/wwi/influence/ssprotest.html>

existed. Sassoon saw himself as an advocate for the soldiers, and he intended his poetry to bridge the gap between the home front and the western front. If they could not realize the war's horrors, then Sassoon would bring the stench, noise, and fear to them. By insisting on the aesthetic of experience, he and the other soldier poets left the public no choice but to challenge their own beliefs.

Visual art also mobilized the aesthetic of experience to educate people lacking “sufficient imagination to realise.”⁸³ The unique impact created by the combination of a soldier's experience and painting is best exemplified by the unprecedented reception of C.R.W. Nevinson's one-man show in September 1916. For several months, Nevinson served as a driver in the Friends' Ambulance Unit. After being sent home due to poor health, he began to paint the trauma that he had witnessed. These canvases are Vorticist translations of his memories of casualty stations filled with the wounded and endless stretches of barren land. The Leicester Galleries in London hosted the works in the *Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings of War*. The public saw such paintings as *A Dawn, 1914* and *La Patrie* (Figure 21). Like Sassoon's poetry, these paintings were a critical look at the war. Nevinson's Vorticist style expressed the physical pain and chaos of modern warfare through the jagged shapes and deep shadows. The show was a critical success, and even Winston Churchill attended.⁸⁴ In 1919, the art critic R.H. Wilenski noted that the exhibition and the “great and quite unexpected interest” it accrued was responsible for the “employment of artists on a large scale.”⁸⁵ During the course of the conflict, “experience” became the overriding aesthetic that the public looked for in war art.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ “The Greatest WWI Painting by Britain's Leading War Artist,” *Sotheby's*, last accessed 3/4/2020 <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/the-greatest-wwi-painting-by-britains-leading-war-artist>

⁸⁵ R.H. Wilenski, “The Nation's War Paintings at Burlington House,” *The Athenaeum*, December 19 1919, 1375.

In 1916, the aesthetic of direct experience became not just a public preference, but also an official policy.⁸⁶ Charles Masterman, head of the government sponsored War Propaganda Bureau (otherwise known as Wellington House), established The Official War Artists program. In June, he appointed Muirhead Bone as the first official war artist. The importance of the program lay in the Bureau's ability to claim absolute authenticity. It did so by conferring the honorary rank of second lieutenant to Bone and then sending him to the Somme. *The Western Front* published 200 of his drawings in ten monthly segments.⁸⁷ About the works, Sue Malvern recognizes the “detachment of a travelogue composed by an uninvolved spectator.”⁸⁸ She was, of course, absolutely correct. Bone never served, and only borrowed the uniform – he witnessed, but did not *experience*. She cites *The Battle of the Somme* as an example of Bone's remoteness (Figure 22). Bone dwarfs the epic subject matter by placing the viewpoint miles away from its epicenter. While the depiction is an accurate representation of what Bone witnessed, its impartiality emphasizes the need for the authentic eye of the experienced soldier.

By 1917, the Bureau was commissioning artists who had done more than simply visit “the Front in the same spirit in which [an artist goes] to Rome” as Hynes claims Bone did.⁸⁹ Veterans like Nevinson, Paul Nash, and Eric Kennington were hired as Official War Artists. Their works were published in *British Artists at the Front*, which replaced *The Western Front*. The change in title reflects the change in focus from objective reporting to an experiential journey.⁹⁰ These were not just images of the front but one soldier's experience there. Each issue

⁸⁶ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 195.

⁸⁷ Fox, *British Art*, 88.

⁸⁸ Sue Malvern, *Modern Art, Britain and the Great War: Witnessing, Testimony and Remembrance*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 24.

⁸⁹ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 160.

⁹⁰ Malvern, *Modern Art*, 29.

showcased a single artist, whose work situated the audience at the Front from a specific perspective.⁹¹ Britons encountered these works in the magazine and in the exhibitions coinciding with the publication.

This program was so well-received that it evolved again in March 1918, when Wellington House became the British War Memorial Committee.⁹² Unlike Wellington House, the Committee was interested in creating legacy rather than propaganda.⁹³ Using official war artists, the Committee began to commission monumental works which would form the first history paintings of the war and become synonymous with the memory of the period. Like the previous campaign, the aesthetic of experience was of deep importance. Meeting notes from 1918 reveal that the list of potential artists was accompanied by a note on their service.⁹⁴ Even while hiring older, established artists like William Orpen and John Singer Sargent, the Committee continued to send them to the front.⁹⁵

In late 1919, the official war art exhibition *The Nations War Paintings and Other Records* at Burlington House received acclaim by both critics and the public. Within the sixteen galleries and across 925 works of art, the aesthetic of experience was immediately recognized. Wilenski wrote that “there are two kinds of pictures in the present exhibition: the pictures by men who were tortured by the war and the pictures by men who were not.”⁹⁶ Those works belonging to the former category “reveal intense intellectual and spiritual emotion.”⁹⁷ Another article in the *Saturday Review* notes that “Here is, as nearly as possible, the ‘real thing’ ranging

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Malvern, *Modern Art*, 71.

⁹³ Malvern, *Modern Art*, 75.

⁹⁴ “British War Memorials Committee,” ART/WA1/522, War Artist Archive, Imperial War Museum.

⁹⁵ To read about the tension felt between the older and younger war artists, see Malvern 91-92.

⁹⁶ Wilenski, “Nations War Paintings, 1375.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

from exact delineation of fact to the expression of personal sensation.”⁹⁸ The review goes on to say that “the bulk of the interesting work shown is by men... whose experiences, soaked into their being, now find expression in their art.”⁹⁹ Gallery III offered a helpful comparison, where visitors could see Paul Nash’s *Menin Road* and David Young Cameron’s *The Battlefield of Ypres*.¹⁰⁰

Nash had been a second lieutenant stationed at Ypres before he was sent home with a broken rib. Only a few days into his leave, almost his entire unit was killed. Nash’s large painting transports the viewer to no-mans-land (Figure 23). Two soldiers at the center of the canvas become the viewer’s surrogates. They are dwarfed by the splintered trees and massive heaps of earth. They hear the shells as they burrow into the ground, creating mushroom clouds of dirt. In contrast, Cameron’s painting lacks the sensory dynamism of Nash’s (Figure 24). Cameron never served, only viewing the front at a safe distance. Interestingly, like Bone’s drawings, viewers of the painting are also placed at a distance, in a quiet landscape, far away from the trees and ruined cottage.

The response to the exhibit was so overwhelming that it was extended for an extra week, running until February 7, 1920. One reporter remarked that it would be necessary to “go back to

⁹⁸ “The Nation’s War Paintings,” *Saturday review* (January 3, 1920), 6.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ While this paper does not discuss stylistic trends such as British modernism, it is worth noting that the reviews cited above favor modernist works. For instance, Wilenski categorizes Nevinson with those artists at the *Nation’s War Paintings* whose work were, in his opinion, less successful than those by artists like Lewis. By doing so Wilenski faults Nevinson for his renewed practice of traditionalism, even though his paintings are skillful and evocative of his wartime experience. In the post-war world, this division between modern and academic styles coalesces with other schisms like those between the young and the old or the veteran and the civilian. For a discussion of these post-war dynamics, read Samuel Hynes’s book, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*. For a study of modernism, see Sue Malvern’s, *Modern Art, Britain, and the Great War*. For scholarship that redirects the gaze towards traditionalism, read Jay Winter’s *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Or for a comparison between modernism and tradition also read Sue Malvern’s book.

Italy in the 14th and 15th centuries to find painting of such communal interest.”¹⁰¹ This exhibition and its public reception testify to the power that the aesthetic of direct experience held over contemporaries. In the next section, we will explore how Smith translated his aesthetic of experience and what that meant to the British public.

¹⁰¹ *Saturday Review*, 7.

SMITH'S AESTHETIC OF EXPERIENCE

After the republication of the *Dance of Death* in 1921, critics recognized the potency of Smith's aesthetic of direct experience. The caliber of skill, authenticity, and emotion was so evident, they equated him with the official war artists. A review in *Studio Talk* recalled Wilenski's comments on *The Nations War Paintings* and included Smith among those successful artists who had been "tortured by the war."¹⁰² Additionally, Campbell Dodgson, Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, further elevated the series by dubbing it one of the "most serious and memorable works of art inspired by the war."¹⁰³ Dodgson had been responsible for choosing which works *British Artists at the Front* would publish, so he too ranked Smith among leading names like Nevinson and Nash.

Reviews of the series echo the enthusiastic reactions to *The Battle of the Somme* and *The Nation's War Paintings*. The following are three excerpts from articles published in 1921. Each writer identifies Smith's first-hand experience with war as the key factor behind the visual and conceptual success of the series.

The deep impression left on his mind by his experiences in this campaign is expressed in two remarkable series of prints...¹⁰⁴ - *The Studio*

The scenes are marked by deep spiritual perception on the part of the artist, and epitomise the horror and devastation of the war with a strength and conviction which have seldom been excelled in pictorial art. One feels that their author has been through the scenes he so vividly portrays, and has seen with his menial eye the gaunt, grim figure of Death acting as the presiding genius in them all.¹⁰⁵ - *The Connoisseur*

¹⁰² Wilenski, "Nation's War Paintings," 1375.

¹⁰³ Campbell Dodgson, "Mr. Percy Smith's 'Dance of Death'," *Print Collector's Quarterly*, October 1921, 325.

¹⁰⁴ "Studio Talk," *The Studio*, 82, no. 344, November 1921, 227.

¹⁰⁵ *The Connoisseur*, 237.

...the result, evidently, of concentrated thought by one who has witnessed and shared in the horrors of war, and has been moved by them to this powerful and serious effort of interpretation. The last thing anyone could wish for him would be a repetition of any similar experience.¹⁰⁶ - *The Print Collector's Quarterly*

Although the first excerpt mentions *Twelve Drypoints of the War*, it is the *Dance of Death* that prompted such high praise and strong emotional reactions. There are reasons why the *Dance* took precedence over the earlier series. While both convey the aesthetic of direct experience, the approaches differ. The drypoints faithfully portray the weaponry of modern warfare, ruined topography of France, and daily life of the Tommy. Additionally, some scenes subtly represent more abstract concepts. As discussed in the second section, Smith's silhouetted trees embody the physical and emotional destruction of war. In contrast, the *Dance* unmistakably gives physical presence to the symbolic. Impending death - a soldier's constant companion - walks, waits, and observes within the real landscape of the war. In seven chilling scenes, the physical and psychological toll of combat is narrated. Viewers gain a brief insight into this experience, both through a journalistic and allegoric perspective. The combination results in a strong empathetic connection that would have been especially resonant only two years after the official end of the war.

Many contemporaries commented on the difficulty of capturing the fullness of modern warfare. In 1917, the German art historian Richard Hamann lamented that "the martyrdom... and the mass, the quantity of grief which such a war has brought over the world, cannot once in passing be compressed in the narrow space of a picture."¹⁰⁷ Official war artist William Orpen, recounted that an officer once told him that he could paint the "flat horizon-line and mudholes"

¹⁰⁶ Dodgson, "Mr. Percy Smith's," 326.

¹⁰⁷ Malvern, *Modern Art*, 92.

from memory but “one could not paint the smell.”¹⁰⁸ While it is a straightforward procedure to illustrate the external ramifications, missing limbs, and shell-pocked land, it was more challenging to suggest the internal effects. As mentioned before, many artists strove to achieve the latter through metaphorical landscapes.

This solution was so widespread that Robert Ross, art critic and advisor to the War Memorial Committee, complained in a letter of the “monotony of theme afforded by the war, even for pictorial purposes.”¹⁰⁹ However, Ross had never been to the front and therefore never encountered such sights as Nevinson’s *After a Push*, 1918 (Figure 25). The scene depicts several gaping shell holes filled with muddy water. This window onto a scarred earth forces the viewer to contemplate the inhabitability of the Front. These works showed the “martyrdom of nature” which echoed the martyrdom of the soldiers.¹¹⁰ These uninhabited landscapes seem to say, “If this is what happened to eternal Earth, think how we ephemeral humans suffer.”

Some artists like Wyndham Lewis relied on the visual force of modernism to depict the harshness of modernized mechanical warfare. Here it was not so much an expression of the psychological damage, but rather the chaos and dehumanization that military service had as a byproduct. His *A Battery Shelled* of 1919 depicts a German artillery bombardment (Figure 26). The entire ground seems unstable as it undulates in jagged lines. Smoke becomes as hard and metallic as the machines creating it. While the center of the composition reflects the chaos and distortion of war, the left-hand side shows something perhaps more troubling. Three gunners

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ “British War Memorials Committee,” ART/WA1/522, War Artist Archives, Imperial War Museum.

¹¹⁰ *Studio Talk*, 228.

appear unperturbed by the event. This painting, and others like it, prove that catastrophes were a daily occurrence on the front to which many soldiers became desensitized.¹¹¹

The *Dance* effectively communicates the soldier's experience in a different way. Smith combined the visible with the invisible, the tangible with the intangible, the describable with the indescribable. He populated the western front with a well-known personification of dread, horror, and sorrow. Within settings as faithfully depicted as news illustrations, the presence of Death is seen walking on duckboards, between shell holes, and in muddy trenches. The public now had a recognizable face on which to place the blame of the loss that pervaded England.

Smith was not the only artist to place a specter on the battlefield. Within the official realm, Sir Charles Sims expressed the grief of his son's death and thousands of others in *Sacrifice* (Figure 27). In the large painting, the Western Front becomes Calvary as a crucified Jesus looks down at the suffering soldiers and lamenting families. Sims was not expressing a unique belief. His monumental painting echoes many war posters and popular works which placed Jesus on the battlefield. James Clark's *The Great Sacrifice* was especially popular (Figure 28). The piece shows a dead Tommy lying on the ground as if asleep while a translucent Christ on a cross appears above him. The public first saw the image as a special fold-out in *The Graphic's* 1914 Christmas issue. Afterwards, it was sold as a print all over England and became a familiar feature in many homes. In 1919, the composition was even translated into a memorial window at St Mary Magdalene in Enfield, honoring the ultimate sacrifice of male parishioners (Figure 29).¹¹²

¹¹¹ Online museum label for Wyndham Lewis, *A Battery Shelled*, 1919, London, The Imperial War Museum, last accessed 4/5/2020 <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/16688>.

¹¹² "The Great Sacrifice," *The Victorian Web*, last accessed 3/4/2020, <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/clark/paintings/1.html>

Historian Stefan Geoble uses the term “patri-passionism” to describe this phenomenon of equating the suffering of the soldier with that of Jesus.¹¹³ It suggests that the Tommy died for a greater cause and was given a heavenly reward. While those popular works aimed to elevate the soldier and to comfort the viewer, Smith’s is meant to accomplish the opposite. In the series, death does not end in glory nor is it painless. Sometimes death is not even a comfort. In *Death Refuses*, the soldier is forced to suffer longer even though his hand reaches out, trying to touch Death’s emaciated back (Figure 9).

In most scenes, Smith is able to conjure moments few other artists could. The concept of a metaphorical dialogue between soldiers and Death allowed him to explore that most intimate transition from living to dying. He lifts the veil between this world and the next by exposing the mystery of death’s call. While many British artists showed the dead or wounded, rarely did they depict the moment just prior to death. Of British depictions, the most famous of dead soldiers is Nevinson’s *Paths of Glory* (Figure 30). Two soldiers lie face down beside a barrier of barbed wire. Their tossed helmets lie beside their discarded bodies. Scratches made into the paint’s surface suggest that the men were trapped under more barbed wire. Nevinson was forbidden to show the painting during an exhibition in 1918. However, he daringly displayed the work with a slip of paper marked “censored” over the fallen men. The entirety of the piece was finally shown in the 1919 *Nations War Paintings* exhibition. By choosing to depict death’s approach, Smith evokes a different reaction. While a corpse elicits a limited response, impending death adds nuance, prompting a more complex connection. By witnessing the experience, the viewer empathetically identifies with the still living victim, enhancing their sympathy.

¹¹³ Stefan Geoble, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 233.

Critics consistently mention “perception” and “witness” as essential elements of the aesthetic of experience. As discussed in the first section, Smith’s personal faith echoed these same basic virtues. The faithful recording of what Smith saw in France is intimately tied to his understanding of his life’s purpose. His motivation for producing the *Dance* was relayed in a quote given in 1922 for the *International Studio*,

The function of Art is to keep alive the spirit of great happenings... whether these happenings were pleasant or unpleasant to humanity, whether the happenings created unhappiness or happiness, is not the point... Subject does not really matter in Art, so long as the truth is in it, and *the people’s memory must be constantly re-awakened if they are to gain by experiences. By being reminded of the truth of a great happening and what man went through, people ought to be inspired to a greater imaginative sympathy with humanity in general, and I hope to make my art a true revealer and interpreter of humanity.*¹¹⁴ (italics added)

This edict is reminiscent of Sassoon’s 1917 letter of protest, which was read in the House of Commons. Both veterans suggest that the public is lacking some fundamental understanding of the war. Additionally, both express the conviction that true expression of experience speaks to the public in a powerful way. However, in Smith’s case it is not that the reality of the war needs to be shown for the first time, but that it needs to be remembered.

The concept of memory was complex in post-war England, and provides the backdrop for viewing the reception of Smith’s series. Throughout the war, the British government never allowed the repatriation of military corpses. For the first time, families could not include the physical remains of loved ones in their mourning rituals.¹¹⁵ Instead, some families received the “kits,” or personal effects, of the deceased. The lack of a body meant there were no World War I cemeteries in England. Instead, their loved ones remained in the ground where they fell or were

¹¹⁴ “A Modern Dance of Death,” *International Studio*, April 1922, 139-142.

¹¹⁵ Jay Winter discusses these issues surrounding bodily non-repatriation in his first chapter of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*.

interred in mass cemeteries established on the continent. Therefore, the once simple and comforting act of visiting a grave became exponentially more complicated. At home, private mourning rituals became public as monuments to the dead satisfied the need for cemeteries.¹¹⁶

The establishment of the Cenotaph on Whitehall, London, exemplifies the public's need for closure. The structure was designed by Edwin Lutyens for the Peace Parade celebrating the war's official end in 1919. The ceremony was centered around the cenotaph, which thousands of soldiers and officers circumambulated and saluted. It remained on Whitehall as a temporary memorial and within a week an estimated 1.2 million people came to pay their respects. Great quantities of flowers laid at its base gave evidence of this pilgrimage.¹¹⁷ This immense public response prompted the cabinet to commission a permanent cenotaph. Even today, the monument to "The Glorious Dead" is integral to the services held every year at 11 am on Remembrance Sunday. For years after the war, memorials continued to be erected all over London. In 1921, during the surge in popularity of the *Dance*, the grieving process still had not been resolved.

Post-war England, however, was a place of contradiction. While much of the public needed closure, everyone, including veterans, wanted to move on as quickly as possible. This resulted in a collective suppression of the war's memory. After 1918, publishers refused to print war memoirs and novels that were overly critical.¹¹⁸ In 1923, the poet Osbert Sitwell published the poem, "The War-Horse Chants," which provides a provocative commentary on Britain's collective amnesia,

¹¹⁶ Patricia Jalland, "Bereavement and Mourning (Great Britain)," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014). For pilgrimages to grave sites and other memorial rituals, see Winter, *Sites of Memory*.

¹¹⁷ "The Cenotaph," *Wikipedia*, last accessed 3/4/2020

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cenotaph#Origins:_the_temporary_Cenotaph

¹¹⁸ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 298-299.

Was there war once?
 I have forgotten it.
 Was there war once?
 —Now food is here.

Now I remember
 How much I suffered—
 Very bad form
 To mention the war.¹¹⁹

Artists also stopped depicting the war after the 1919 exhibition, *The Nations War Paintings*.¹²⁰ The Nash brothers returned to their landscapes, William Orpen again painted society portraits, and Nevinson retreated to land- and cityscapes. The European art world had experienced a “return to order.” Artists began creating fleshy, classical figures and placing them in Arcadian landscapes.¹²¹ These lush images are a conscious turning away from the barren lands of the Front. For instance in England, Paul Nash’s *The Lake* originally placed a Rubenesque woman on the shore of a glassy lake surrounded by verdant trees (Figure 31). Although Nash later painted the woman out, the concentration on a lush Arcadia remained. In images like *The Lake*, bodies and land were returned to their whole and fruitful selves as they were before the war.¹²²

Reviews of Smith’s series reference the duality within the British public. Writing in 1922, a critic makes an overt reference to this denial. “The tendency of today is to turn aside from unpleasantness — to forget in memories of glory the aspects of war which are most grim.”

¹¹⁹ Osbert Sitwell, “Out of the Flame,” *The Project Gutenberg*, last accessed 3/4/2020, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61369/61369-h/61369-h.htm#warhorse>

¹²⁰ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 298.

¹²¹ Malvern, *Modern Art*, 158.

¹²² Malvern, *Modern Art*, 162

¹²³ Again in 1926, Stafford Leake writes that the series has “struck a chord which some may be still unwilling to hear.”¹²⁴ The most moving of all perhaps is H.M. Tomlinson’s introduction to *Sixteen Drypoints of the War* published in 1930,

I have no idea what a critic who never knew the Somme would say of these drawings; but they are an assurance to me that some experiences of my own, *which I had begun to think were a dream about which I had better keep quiet, if I did not want people to tap their foreheads sadly*, were once veritably of this earth, and no dream at all. Anyhow, the artist must have dreamed the same dream.¹²⁵ [italics added]

These reviews validate Smith’s assertion that his series was a necessity. As the years progressed, the public became more distant from the war, but Smith’s series nevertheless remained poignant.

Smith inspired “a greater imaginative sympathy” by making the tragedy of the war explicit.¹²⁶ By showing the soldiers in hopeless conditions and their final moments, the series becomes a practice in empathy. Though it contains only seven scenes, one imagines it expanding into thousands of similar, uncelebrated moments. The next section discusses why Smith decided to resurrect the medieval allegory and how his series fits into the long tradition of the Dance of Death.

¹²³ L.M., “The Dance of Death: A series of Etchings by Percy Smith,” *The American Magazine of Art*, 13, no. 4, 1922, 122.

¹²⁴ Leake, “War and Peace,” 219.

¹²⁵ Meacock, *A Record of the Great War*, 43.

¹²⁶ “A Modern Dance of Death,” *International Studio*, 142.

THE BRITISH PUBLIC AND THE DANCE OF DEATH

Although reaching its zenith in the fifteenth century, the Dance of Death in no way remained dormant until Smith's adaptation of its imagery in 1919. Over the course of several centuries, the Dance had been reused to reflect public responses to viral infections, revolts, wars, and class tensions. These reincarnations reflect Sarah Webster Goodwin's assessment of the nineteenth-century treatment of the subject that "Death saunters in during times of social upheaval."¹²⁷ The First World War's unprecedented carnage provided the perfect catalyst for a revisitation of this medieval theme. By the time Smith's British audiences saw his series, they had been well-primed to receive its powerful meditation on a soldier's ultimate sacrifice.

The Dance of Death has been targeted towards the public since its first wave of popularity in the fifteenth century. Viewers typically encountered the Dance in large frescoes that appeared in churches or cloisters where crowds would frequently congregate. The first known Dance appeared in the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris. The fresco was painted between 1424-1425 and ran along the southern wall of the inner courtyard. The composition is no longer extant, but Guyot Marchant faithfully recorded it through a series of woodcuts published in 1485 (Figure 32). The Paris murals depicted a long line of figures, alternating between the living and the dead which were portrayed as animated decaying skeletons. The living represented a specific class or profession within contemporary European society, and their placement within the macabre procession echoed their social hierarchy. All figures join hands or

¹²⁷ Sarah Webster Goodwin, *Kitsch and Culture: The Dance of Death in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Graphic Arts*, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc, 1988), 20.

tug on the drapery of their neighbors (Figure 32). This sequential juxtaposition symbolized that death was the great equalizer. Death consumes Popes as voraciously as it does children.

The large murals promoted interaction. The medieval viewer engaged in what Elina Gertsman calls “performative participation.”¹²⁸ To elucidate this performance, Gertsman analyzes Simon Marmion’s 1459 painting, *Scenes from the Life of St Bertin* (Figure 33). At the center of the composition, behind the crowd of monks, a Dance of Death fresco can be seen running along the walls of the cloister.¹²⁹ Several figures are shown circumambulating the cloister, their contemplation of the frescoes guided by the underlying inscriptions. Two visitors have even stopped to meditate on a particular passage. The importance of this *meditatio mortis* is expressed through the central placement of this pair of figures.¹³⁰ The composition of the whole panel radiates from this small detail. Therefore the entire work is colored by the examination of one’s soul. Although Gertsman argues that this performative aspect was lost with the subsequent dissemination of illustrated books, the meditative moral of the Dance did not disappear.

Dances of Death were among the first books to be produced and they continued to be popular in their new episodic form.¹³¹ The most influential booklet was by Hans Holbein, published in 1538, to be discussed in the next section (Figure 43). For centuries, every Dance was in some way a derivation of his woodcuts. Between 1786-1835, at least fifteen separate editions of Holbein’s celebrated Dance entered Britain alone.¹³² The popularity of the Dance

¹²⁸ Elina Gertsman, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance*, (Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2010), 163.

¹²⁹ Gertsman, *The Dance of Death*, 163.

¹³⁰ Gertsman, *The Dance of Death*, 154.

¹³¹ Goodwin, *Kitsch and Culture*, 25.

¹³² Goodwin, *Kitsch and Culture*, 13.

blossomed again in the nineteenth century when it entered public consciousness and experience in such a way that Goodwin characterizes it as kitsch.¹³³

The episodic form continued to be produced with the highest numbers of series created in England and Germany. Among the most popular in England were: *The British Dance of Death* by Benedictus Antonio Van Assen, 1825; *Death's Doings* by Richard Dagley, 1826; and Thomas Rowlandson's *The English Dance of Death*, published serially between 1814 and 1816. Of the three, Rowlandson's most closely operates in a way similar to Holbein's series. Death is energetic and surprises his victims amidst their daily actions. Its vibrancy of color, dynamic settings and interactions may have contributed to its success. It was so well received that it was republished in a two-volume set in 1903. Also popular in the early 20th century was *The Doings of Death* by William Strang, published in 1901.

In addition to the traditional episodic forms, the concept of the Dance appeared in one-off cartoons and paintings. For instance, on the front page of *Illustrated Police News* in 1888, a skeleton dressed in gentleman's clothing grins at an unsuspecting female victim as she unlocks her door to let him in (Figure 34). This interaction between a victim and disguised Death is the product of the Dance tradition. However, here it is used to report on the grisly Whitechapel murders in London. The same can be said for the world of fine art. For example, English artists like Joseph Wright of Derby were taken by the theme.¹³⁴ His *The Old Man with Death* of 1773 shows a man attempting to stave off a skeleton who reaches out to receive his soul (Figure 35).

The Dance of Death had so successfully entered the public consciousness that its meaning could be gleaned without the aid of imagery.¹³⁵ In England, the phrase "The Dance of

¹³³ Goodwin, *Kitsch and Culture*, throughout.

¹³⁴ Goodwin, *Kitsch and Culture*, 16.

¹³⁵ Goodwin, *Kitsch and Culture*, 12.

Death” frequently appeared alone in periodicals. It was used for headlines concerning executions, as a descriptor for accidents, and as titles for poems. Opening up *Punch*, *The Sporting Gazette*, or *Funny Folks: A Weekly Budget of Funny Pictures, Funny Notes, Funny Jokes, and Funny Stories* revealed recurring references to this medieval theme. Scholarship on the Dance also affected its presence in periodicals. For instance, in the later part of the nineteenth century, educational essays dedicated to Holbein and the whole medieval tradition appeared in *The Ladies' Treasury: An Illustrated Magazine of Entertaining Literature*.¹³⁶ Features like this were likely inspired by the scholarship of Francis Douce, Keeper of the Department of Manuscripts for the British Museum. He published a reproduction of Holbein’s Dance and an accompanying essay on the motif in the visual arts in 1833 and again in 1849, 1858, and 1890.

In England, interest in the Dance of Death coincided with a revitalization of other aspects of medieval culture. During the nineteenth-century, a revival of the Arthurian legend deeply influenced English art, literature, and culture. The English public received a flood of content related to the subject like knights, helpless maidens, and chivalry. For instance, Sir Walter Scott’s books became very popular. *Ivanhoe* of 1820 was particularly influential.¹³⁷ Britons could also read Lord Alfred Tennyson’s twelve-part series *Idylls of the King*. These narrative poems inspired pre-Raphaelites like John William Waterhouse. For instance, his *Lady of Shalott* is a direct illustration of Tennyson’s poem of the same name (Figure 36).¹³⁸ This revival of courtly romance and knightly courage also influenced other members of the British art world like William Dyce, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, and Aubrey Beardsley.

¹³⁶ For more on plays, books, and music related to the Dance of Death see Goodwin’s book.

¹³⁷ Mark Girouard, "A Return to Camelot," *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 5, no. 4, 1981, 182, last accessed 4/5/2020. www.jstor.org/stable/40256532.

¹³⁸ Online museum label for John William Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1888, London, Tate, last accessed 4/5/2020 <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/waterhouse-the-lady-of-shalott-n01543>.

Ideas of chivalry found their way into the daily lives of many English subjects creating a very concrete sense of “Britishness.” These ideas became useful when trying to support the war effort. The English used the romanticized idea of knighthood and projected it onto their soldiers. This popular understanding fortified the Tommies with bravery and honor.¹³⁹ While these concepts in England were more felt than visualized, one enlistment poster frames the war in knightly terms.¹⁴⁰ Within a tondo at the center of the poster, Saint George clad in armor atop a white horse buries his lance into a thrashing green dragon (Figure 37). Surrounding the image are the words, “Britain Needs You At Once.” As Saint George is the patron of England, the savage beast must be Germany. The medieval imagery also became a way to justify the war. Knights like Saint George fought under holy orders for God, King, and country.

By the end of the war, medieval imagery became a fitting way to commemorate the dead. Crusading iconography was particularly useful to both honor the dead and comfort the living.¹⁴¹ Similar to the enlistment poster, this association elevated the common soldier and blessed his sacrifice. Especially popular was the appropriation of the Crusader’s longsword. In 1918, Sir Reginald Blomfield used the weapon to design the “cross of sacrifice” which would be placed in commonwealth war cemeteries on the Western and Eastern Fronts (Figure 38). Blomfield enhanced the understanding of righteous sacrifice by placing a cruciform longsword at the center of a stone cross.

The casket for the Unknown Warrior buried in Westminster Abbey also has a Crusader’s sword. As a symbol of the universal sacrifices made during the war from the British public, King George V chose a real sword from the Royal Collection to be fused to the coffin. At the

¹³⁹ More on chivalry and Victorian life in Allen J. Frantzen’s *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War*.

¹⁴⁰ As a nation, Germany featured medievalism into nearly every poster and monument, more so than Britain.

¹⁴¹ Goeble, *The Great War and Medieval Memory*, 289.

internment in 1920, “O Valiant Hearts” was sung. The hymn was written for the fallen of WWI and still features in Remembrance Day observances. The song is laden with chivalric imagery,

“Tranquil you lie, your knightly virtue proved...
 These were His servants, in His steps they trod,
 Following through death the martyred Son of God:
 Victor, He rose; victorious too shall rise
 They who have drunk His cup of sacrifice.”¹⁴²

The lyrics demonstrate how the British public adopted a romanticized understanding of the medieval period and England’s history. It also expresses how they reached into their shared past to find ways to communally cope with the present.

The Dance of Death also found its regeneration during the war. Most famously, the political satirist Louis Raemaekers used the motif in his anti-German cartoons. Raemakers’s animated skeletons condemned the Germans and called for Allied help for the invaded Belgians. In some of the cartoons, Germany is seduced by Death. For instance, *Germany Dances with Death* shows a skeleton, unclothed except for a pair of dancing shoes, leading an infatuated female personification of Germany (Figure 39). She falls haphazardly into him, pressing her fleshy body into his sharp bones. The caption underneath the image reads, “From East to West I Dance with Thee.” Additionally, in one image Death and Kaiser Wilhelm are shown plotting together (Figure 40). The nimble skeleton bends his long legs to meet the Kaiser’s eye. As they whisper, Death’s scythe reaches around and caresses the Kaiser’s fat neck.

Wellington House contracted Raemaekers after he was continuously censored by the Dutch government. This alliance enabled Raemaekers’s work to be spread across all the allied nations and even to America, which had yet to join the war. Forty of his cartoons were published

¹⁴² Goeble, *The Great War and Medieval Memory*, 268 & “O Valiant Hearts,” *Wikipedia*, last accessed 4/5/2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Valiant_Hearts

in *Raemaekers Cartoons* which was translated in eighteen languages and distributed worldwide. His works reached a wide spectrum of people, appearing in publications, exhibitions, posters, postcards and even Black Cat cigarette cards.

German artists also found the medieval motif to be an apt way to express their responses to the war. These series were either created in 1919 or afterwards so their content will not be analyzed in relation to Smith's production. However, Melchoir Grosse's *Gestalten Des Todes, Ein Totentanz des Weltkrieges* published in 1923 deserves mention. He crafted fifteen war scenes where Death is a colossal presence (Figure 41). Its silhouetted skeleton dwarfs surrounding human forms, and becomes the personification of mechanical warfare. Death hurls bombs, crashes planes with a butterfly net, and tugs the marionette strings of both the Allied and Axis powers.

Germany also used the motif on their commemorative war medals.¹⁴³ Similar to Grosse's gargantuan Death, Ludwig Gies's medal depicts a skeleton standing head and shoulders over the German troops he leads (Figure 42). He places a fleshless arm around a soldier and cranes his neck back to make sure that the others are following him. Etched underneath the grim procession is "Totentanz 1914-1917."

Smith chose a motif that had been used for centuries to express widespread unrest. That he was not the only artist to use the Dance speaks to its profound ability to reach a grieving public, which had become acquainted with the motif, making it not only powerful but accessible. Smith's series was ranked a success not only in terms of war art but also within the tradition of the Dance itself. In 1931, American pathologist, pioneer in cancer genetics and amateur historian

¹⁴³ Brown, *Percy John Smith*, 18.

of the Dance of Death, Aldred Scott Warthin, claimed that Smith's series is "the one work of the War period that can in any degree be said to rank in importance with the works of Holbein and Rethel."¹⁴⁴ Contemporary reviews of the series likewise place Smith with the great adaptors of the theme. However, while Smith expertly tapped into a longstanding tradition, critics noted that he "freed himself from the tradition of Holbein."¹⁴⁵ The following chapter will analyze the choices and changes Smith made in his adaptation of the Dance of Death tradition and what those decisions meant to his original viewers and his own experiences.

¹⁴⁴ Aldred Scott Warthin, *The physician of the dance of death: a historical study of the evolution of the dance of death mythus in art*, (New York: Paul B. Hoeber Inc, 1931), 125.

¹⁴⁵ *International Studio*, 141.

SMITH'S DANCE OF DEATH

The previous section demonstrated that Smith's adaptation of the Dance of Death theme was well received. His skill and imagination were praised and ranked among those artists who have most contributed to that tradition. In addition to acknowledging his success, critics noted his innovations. While Smith understood that the Dance was an effective way to discuss widespread trauma, he acknowledged that the uniqueness of the First World War called for some alterations. First, Smith inserted space between Death and its target, which converted the scene from a "taking away" moment to the pregnant pause immediately before. Also, by altering the action of his figures, he shifted the tone of his series from a critical to a sympathetic one. The first change anchors the viewer within the soldier's experience. They come face to face with the unique and taxing relationship soldiers had with death. The latter adjustment helped Smith to achieve his goal of awakening in viewers "a greater imagined sympathy."¹⁴⁶ Together, these two modifications provided a more impactful, moving commemoration of the war-dead.

For the sake of analysis, comparative examples have been chosen based on their popularity and importance in England in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries. These Dances would likely have been known by Smith and his audience. In the *Print Collector's Quarterly*, Dodgson identified William Strang's *The Doings of Death* as the most powerful version in modern times.¹⁴⁷ Goodwin cites Richard Dagley's *Death's Doings*, Thomas Rowlandson's *English Dance of Death*, and Benedictus Antonio van Assen's *British Dance of*

¹⁴⁶ *International Studio*, 142.

¹⁴⁷ Dodgson, "Mr. Percy Smith's," 323.

Death series as being particularly popular in England. Likewise, the widespread knowledge of Holbein's treatment of the theme makes his series perennially applicable. Finally, in order to establish the longevity of certain traditions, Guyot Marchant's reproductions of the Paris fresco will be considered as well.

Gertsman notes that traditional Dances of Death depict the moment of "taking away."¹⁴⁸ Upon touching the victim or their belongings, the two figures – Death and the victim – enter a liminal space between their two worlds. It is a definitive moment of connection before they are spirited away to the realm of the dead. Originally, this relationship was formed by the act of dancing.¹⁴⁹ The medieval frescoes represented a *Reigen*, or a medieval circle dance, where each participant is connected by the holding of hands.¹⁵⁰ While the circle was flattened into a procession on the church walls, each figure remained linked by holding hands or grasping a neighbor's clothing. Although this procession was interrupted by the book format, the importance of a physical relationship remained into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Holbein established what would become the canonical type of relationship. Although he removed the literal dance, he augmented the physicality and interaction between figures.¹⁵¹ Holbein's skeletons continued to grab a victim's arm as seen in *The Old Man* or hold onto their clothes as in *The Abbess*, but they also become more involved within their depicted surroundings (Figures 43-44). Holbein's settings are so personalized that they act as an extension of the victim, allowing Death to interact with the environment and create the same liminal space. For instance, in *The Miser* the skeleton snatches the money rather than the old man (Figure 46).¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Gertsman, *The Dance of Death*, 69.

¹⁴⁹ Gertsman, *The Dance of Death*, 164.

¹⁵⁰ Goodwin, *Kitsch and Culture*, 45.

¹⁵¹ Gertsman, *The Dance of Death*, 179.

¹⁵² Gertsman, *The Dance of Death*, 174.

Similar to the other scenes, the irate miser engages with Death, rising from his chair and waving his arms to stop the theft.

Rowlandson's popular *Dance* is particularly informed by this heightened reciprocity. The reaping becomes increasingly dynamic as the skeletons are immersed in the settings and impishly choreograph elaborate abductions or subterfuges. An excellent example is *The Law Overthrown* (Figure 46). A completely skeletal Death wearing a cape drives a carriage transporting a wigged magistrate. Whipping the horses into a frenzy, Death purposely runs into a wheelbarrow and precariously tips the carriage. Death himself is lifted from the driver's seat with his hat flinging off. Meanwhile, the passenger gripping the carriage brandishes a rolled document, his mouth stretched into a loud scream. Holbein's influence pervades the print with Death's visitation becoming more concrete as he saunters into the daily life of his victim and snatches them away.¹⁵³

Subtler versions of the relationship also persisted after Holbein. For example, in van Assen's *The Mother*, Death sits in a chair by the fire cradling an infant that he feeds with a small spoon. In his later series, Strang particularly focuses on the simple link formed by touch. In his *Death and the Robber*, Death, his bones covered by his robe, lunges forward as he grips the neck of the thief (Figure 47). The man falls backwards under the strength of Death's attack and the weight of his robber sack filled with the possessions of others.

In contrast, Smith eliminates any kind of reciprocal relationship between Death and the soldiers. In none of the prints does Death come into contact with a soldier or his uniform. The near exception is *Death Forbids*, where the Reaper reaches toward the soldier's hand to prevent

¹⁵³ Goodwin, *Kitsch and Culture*, 24.

his signaling the stretcher bearers, who fade into the distance (Figure 4). However, instead of pulling it away or pushing it down, Death's fingers simply hover above the soldier's hand. In *Death Refuses*, it is the soldier that attempts to establish this traditional relationship (Figure 7). At the bottom of a trench, writhing with pain from a gas attack which has taken his comrade, the soldier reaches out towards Death, who turns his back, rejecting the plea for his relieving touch. Furthermore, Smith's Death interacts minimally with the settings: he leans on a tree trunk in *Forbids* and sits on a mound in *Waits* (Figures 4 & 8).

Smith places a distance between his actors. In most scenes, Death stands several paces away from his victim, making no attempt to establish contact. In *Death Waits*, he even sits alone with no soldiers around at that moment with whom to interact (Figure 8).¹⁵⁴ The physical orientations of Death and the soldiers augment the gap by disallowing direct eye contact. Even the viewer cannot look the soldiers in the eyes as their faces are hidden by a lost profile or a gas mask. The exception is the final print, *Death Intoxicated*, which contains many anomalies within the series (Figure 10). Here, Death looks down at the two combatants before him. These soldiers, however, only look at one another and disregard the figure of Death entirely.

Smith, therefore, opts to depict a different moment than most previous Dances. He illustrates not the reaping, but the instant before. In *Death Forbids*, the two figures are perpetually frozen in the split second prior to their connection and entrance into the liminal space; at this point, the threshold remains closed (Figure 4). By depicting the moment before death, Smith encourages viewers to contemplate the soldier's existence more so than his end. For instance, although two soldiers appear in *Death Refuses*, the viewer forms a stronger connection

¹⁵⁴ In traditional Dances it is rare that Death appears alone unless in a frontispiece. For instance, at the beginning of Rowlandson's Dance, Death sits atop a globe similarly with his head in his hand.

with the one still living (Figure 7). The soldier lying in the corner invokes less contemplation and sympathy. In contrast, the still-struggling soldier conveys to the viewer the deep-seated fear and pain that comprises his life. For the non-veteran, Smith illustrates just how great that pain is by having the soldier readily choose death instead.

Smith uses distance between Death and the soldier to conjure for the viewer the psychological condition of warfare. A soldier's life is constantly in the shadow of Death, who walks beside him, waits for him in the battlefield, and watches him suffer. In the series, Death is not yet a finite reality but rather a continually felt presence. *Death Marches* best visualizes the constancy of Death's attendance as he follows the soldiers to their unknown fate (Figure 5). The print depicts a passing column of British soldiers marching shoulder to shoulder in rows of four. On the other side of the procession, Death walks alone, towering over the servicemen. Wherever they are headed, Smith foreshadows the dangers awaiting them by placing Death above them. Holbein showed Death and the soldier in the midst of combat (Figure 49). Other artists like Strang and Rowlandson showed him on the battlefield (Figure 50). Instead, Smith shows Death not as an agitator but as a symbolic reminder of the peril that pervades a soldier's experience. Looking at the rows of anonymous, identical men, the viewer understands that death is in the thoughts of every soldier every day. Smith illustrates what Canadian infantryman John Lynch said of Death, who is "ever present, ready to pounce at any moment."¹⁵⁵

Soldiers of the First World War knew death in a variety of forms, most of which were seen for the first time in history. Minute to minute they had to calculate for the danger of

¹⁵⁵ Tim Cook, "Grave Beliefs: Stories of the Supernatural and the Uncanny among Canada's Great War Trench Soldiers," *Journal of Military History*, 77, no. 2, April 2013, 532.

“random death.” The pervasiveness of this feeling is expressed in a poem whose last stanza Smith copied in his war diary:¹⁵⁶

Death whining down from Heaven,
 Death roaring from the ground,
 Death stinking in the nostril,
 Death shrill in every sound...

The series conjures Death in a variety of modes common during the war. In *Death Awed*, he appears next to the remnants of a man who had been blown up by a shell; in *Death Ponders* and *Refuses the Reaper* follows a gas attack; in *Death Forbids* the soldier, trapped in barbed wire, was possibly hit by machine gun fire; and in *Death Waits* he sits in the midst of a bombardment, which frequently produced shellshock. In short, Smith introduces the viewer to a breadth of frontline traumas (Figures 6, 9, 7, 4, & 8).

In some of the prints, Death appears closer to a soldier than in the others. Presumably, the closer the proximity, the more intense the sensation of Death’s presence is in the soldier’s mind. This would find parallels in actual experience. Though death was always a constant element to contend with, at times it felt stronger. A soldier’s relationship with death is so intimate, he could sense its approach. When this happened, many soldiers recorded premonitions of their own deaths. In his exploration of the supernatural and the uncanny felt by Canadian trench soldiers,

¹⁵⁶ William Noel Hodgson, “Back to Rest,” 1916, PoemHunter, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/back-to-rest/>. Smith only copied the following last stanza in his war diary,

We that have seen the strongest,
 Cry like a beaten child,
 The sanest eyes unholy,
 The cleanest hands defiled,
 We that have known the heart blood
 Less than the lees of wine,
 We that have seen men broken,
 We know man is divine.

historian Tim Cook suggests that the constant exposure to death and its many forms sensitized soldiers to a form of sixth-sense.¹⁵⁷

One instance of possible clairvoyance is recorded by Geoffrey Smith in his compilation of interviews called *A Collection of Amusing and Tragic Stories Related by Different Servicemen from the First World War*. The notebook contains recollections labeled “worst” and “most amusing” experiences. Sergeant Major Shersby of the R.S.A’s worst experience involves an act of premonition.¹⁵⁸ He recalls that in 1918 a fellow soldier had received news of his daughter’s birth. After reading that letter, the once jovial man’s manner changed completely. He began telling everyone that he did not expect to “get home alive to see her.” A few days later, Shersby found him “with a huge piece of a shell in his chest having partly gone through the very letter which sent him the news.” There are many other accounts of soldiers who also accurately sensed that their death was coming.¹⁵⁹ Smith possibly visualizes this sensation in prints like *Death Forbids*, where Death’s touch is so close that it casts a shadow on the soldier’s hand (Figure 4).

Traditional Dances are eschatological, concerned with the moment of dying and its repercussions. Smith, on the other hand, wants his public to consider the soldier’s difficult experience. In so doing, he illustrates the trauma that the Front inflicted on a soldier, which psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton calls the “death imprint.”¹⁶⁰ According to Lifton, this impression is left when the young soldier experiences a constant “terror of premature, unacceptable dying.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Cook, *Grave Beliefs*, 532. An image of *Death Forbids* accompanies Cook’s discussion of premonitions.

¹⁵⁸ Geoffrey Smith, *A Collection of Amusing and Tragic Stories Related by Different Servicemen from the First World War*, Documents.6769, Private Papers, Imperial War Museum.

¹⁵⁹ Of course there were many “premonitions” that did not come to fruition.

¹⁶⁰ William P. Nash, “The Spectrum of War Stressors,” in *Combat Stress Injury Theory, Research, and Management* Edited by Charles R. Figley and William P. Nash, 50.

http://www.ncdsv.org/images/RPSBS_Combat-stress-injury-theory-research-and-management_4-24-2006.pdf

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

Smith's series allows the British public to observe this trauma and gain through experiential understanding of those who endured it first-hand.

The previous chapter explained that traditional Dances of Death are born from social unrest. Consequently, they inherently possess a critical tone. In presenting Death as the Great Equalizer – taking both kings and peasants – these series also present an antinomian Death who challenges the earthly strata of power.¹⁶² While Death comes for all, he tends to enact his own judgment and comes more voraciously for those who have spent their lives questionably. In moralizing depictions of the Reaper, artists warned viewers of their own potential fate.¹⁶³

For instance, in Strang's Dance, Death actively differentiates between a hard-working husbandman and a loathsome thief. The latter image has already been discussed. Death clearly enjoys acting the part of the vigilante, wrapping his cold bones around the thief's neck. As he squeezes out life, Death's boney brow knots in determination and his mouth opens in a triumphant growl. The Reaper's blatant lack of sympathy presumably mirrors that of the viewer as well. Contrarily, in *Death and the Husbandman*, the moment of taking is gentle and filled with mercy (Figure 48). The robed skeleton leans into the old man, helping him with his coat. The farmer's tools rest at his feet, as he is finally able to discard them. Death expresses no glee in claiming this man. Instead, his mouth is a thin line that tilts slightly downward and the formation of his brow displays concern. To the old farmer, Death has come as a liberator.

¹⁶² Gertsman, *The Dance of Death*, 163.

¹⁶³ Goodwin discusses at length how the textual accompaniments also facilitate a sense of judgment. On the medieval frescoes, each figure is paired with a bit of dialogue. Following along with the imagery, the procession appears as one long conversation between Death and his victim. These conversations, as Goodwin points out, are not dialectic but rather each reinforces for the viewer the corruption of the victim. Holbein adapted this tradition. His texts are not dialogues but quatrains which elaborate upon the scene and clarify the moralistic judgment for the viewer. It is this form of text which most persists into the nineteenth century. Most Dance series, then, are accompanied by lengthy texts which have little to do with the image. Smith chose to break with the textual tradition. Though we know he could eloquently write, he decided to only include titles. Goodwin 41-42, and Gertsman 178-9

While Dances of Death have always had an element of satire, this more dynamic expression of judgement is the product of Holbein. By increasing the level of reciprocity between Death and the taken, he amplified the moralistic tone. Unlike participants in the Parisian fresco, his actors show anger, surprise, and fear as rapacious skeletons spring up among the living. For instance, in *The Abbess*, the victim tilts back her head and screams as she is pulled from the abbey by her scapular (Figure 44). The nun at the door witnesses the abduction, throwing her arms in the air and letting out an equally expressive yell. Death joins the choir, lifting his head and opening his jaws in a triumphant and deranged howl.

As *International Studio* reported in 1922, a primary difference between Smith's Dance of Death and Holbein's is the former's lack of "humor" and "occasional satire."¹⁶⁴ Smith's Death does not make it his goal to terrorize his victims by jumping out in ambush and surprising them. Instead, he patiently and silently follows behind or alongside them. With the exception of *Death Intoxicated*, Death does not make broad, theatrical demonstrations, but rather turns inward, clutching his shroud. Nor does he lean into the face of the victim with a wide grin. On the contrary, he solemnly covers his head at times and turns his face away. Death's choice of wardrobe is similarly different and more dignified. He does not walk around bone-naked terrifying participants nor does he disguise himself in contemporary dress to beguile or taunt his victims. Instead, he wears a burial shroud as if mourning the losses that must be taken. In making these alterations to the character of Death, Smith transforms the tone of the series from a chaotic and satirical one to a still and contemplative mood. Smith respectfully creates a space where the viewer can empathetically connect with the soldiers.

¹⁶⁴ *International Studio*, 141.

When reviewing the prints, Smith's friend and art critic Stafford Leake dubbed the series "intensely human."¹⁶⁵ Although referring to Smith's psychological treatment of the individual soldiers, this observation can be extended to Death's own character as well. Smith grants Death far more of a personality than he does his soldiers. He even provided titles that help narrate the thought process of the Reaper. Perhaps the most impactful and "intensely human" example is *Death Awed* (Figure 6). The viewer is given the uncommon opportunity to witness Death reacting to modern warfare. The skeletal figure stands frozen on a duckboard, unable to tear his cavernous eye sockets away from the two boots that lie to the right. The rest of the soldier's body is obliterated. Death's mouth parts in amazement and shock at seeing the splintered leg bones emerging from the boots. His body language betrays a modicum of discomfort along with his wonderment. At the moment of discovery, both Death's shoulders and his right hand instinctively rise, but his left hand clutches the shroud, pulling it tighter across his chest, as if feeling a chill. As with other Dances, the viewer looks to Death to better understand how to react. Here, all are stunned by the barbarous carnage of the Great War.

The one exception to Smith's introspective Reaper is the ultimate print, *Death Intoxicated*, where he abandons all ceremony and reverts back to his ghoulish medieval past (Figure 10). He throws off his shroud, at last revealing his bare bones as he kicks, jumps, and howls. Death eggs on the British soldier rushing to bayonet a kneeling German. In the distance, a sea of faintly-etched soldiers locked in combat indistinguishably merges with the gaseous cloud swirling around the dancing Death. The unique pandemonium of this print fuels Death to his full capacity.

¹⁶⁵ Stafford Leake, "War and Peace in the Etchings and Drawings of Percy Smith," *The Bookman's Journal* Vol 13, No. 54, (1926), 219.

It is his full spectrum of moods that makes Smith's Death so human. As mentioned previously, other traditional Deaths possess a similar duality as they express sympathy for some while being ruthless with others. However, no previous Dance seems to have completely abandoned the critical message. Although Death dances in the final scene, the viewer does not adopt a condemning attitude towards the victims. Instead, the entire series is crafted to provoke sympathy for the servicemen. While the actions of Death in part facilitate this reaction, the treatment of the soldier must also be considered.

Unlike other Dances, Smith only depicts one profession and social status: the enlisted Tommy. The only exception is the German soldier in the final scene, but even he seems to be of comparable rank. All participants are related through their anonymity and helplessness. The passivity of Smith's servicemen is markedly different from Holbein's soldiers. Holbein's noble knight fought back against Death, raising his arms to gain the momentum to swing his sword at the skeletal foe (Figure 49). The bare bones starkly contrast with the knight's heavy armor, underscoring the futility to fight against all-conquering death.¹⁶⁶ This courageous interaction was imitated for centuries. Even Rowlandson's soldiers fire back at Death who mans a cannon in his print, *The Battle* (Figure 50). In the case of Smith, the soldiers have no way of combating Death in his new forms nor do they even try.

While the viewer is able to read the face of Death and understand his thoughts, Smith hides the identity of the soldiers. All the viewer can do is look at their bodies, which often betray signs of trauma. In *Death Ponders*, the legs of the crawling soldier have been rendered useless (Figure 9). The soldier underneath the tree in *Death Forbids* is tangled in barbed wire (Figure 4).

¹⁶⁶ "The Soldier," in *Dancing with Death: The origins and development of the Dance of Death motif and its representation in graphic art: the Gemmell Collection at the University of Glasgow Library*, University of Glasgow, last accessed 4/5/2020, <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/library/files/special/exhibns/death/thesoldier.html>.

The hands of the two soldiers at the bottom of the trench in *Death Refuses* are gnarled with the effects of chemical gas (Figure 7). Finally, all that remains of the man in *Death Awed* are his boots (Figure 6). Unlike Holbein's brawny, defiant knight, Smith's combatants are examples of the anti-hero, a concept which evolved from the First World War. Soldiers were no longer bathed in glory; they no longer had any strength or agency. Instead they became what Wyndham Lewis referred to as "the man things are done to."¹⁶⁷

Smith joined authors and artists in depicting a new kind of soldier, who is more like a martyr. For example, particularly popular in England during the last year of the war was Georges Duhamel's *The New Book of Martyrs*. Duhamel served as a military surgeon on the Western Front, and like Smith, he portrays soldiers as passive victims who can only suffer and then die.¹⁶⁸ A chapter titled "Memories of the Martyrs" relays twenty-seven short stories of men that he treated. Like Smith's account, the protagonists are not the men themselves, but their wrecked bodies. Most stories begin with the introduction of the wound, "When I put my finger near his injured eye;" "The skin is beginning to form new flesh;" or "The root of the evil is not so much the shattered leg, as the little wound in the arm, from which so much good blood was lost."¹⁶⁹ The soldiers of the First World War were "entirely reduced to terms of suffering."¹⁷⁰ By the end of the war, prose, poetry, and painting had introduced the British public to this new martyr.

In displaying the trauma of the World War I soldier for his British public, Smith made one last alternation to the traditional Dances of Death. He transformed the Dance from a

¹⁶⁷ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 208.

¹⁶⁸ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 206.

¹⁶⁹ Georges Duhamel, *New Lives of Martyrs*, (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1918), 53, 54, 44 https://books.google.com/books?id=MOZNAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

¹⁷⁰ Duhamel, *New Lives of Martyrs*, 57-58.

moralistic warning to an empathetic commemoration. For centuries, most Dances foreshadowed the inevitable demise of its audience through the deaths of stereotypical characters. Smith instead utilized the trope to remember the lost lives of real people. Although Smith's soldiers are themselves generic characters, they represent thousands of actual servicemen. In this way, Smith's post-war commentary is like the tomb to the unknown warrior that rests with the kings in Westminster.

CONCLUSION

Powerful testimony to the lingering impact the *Dance of Death 1914-1918* had on its viewers comes from Sybil-Elaine Hodgkinson. In 1993, Hodgkinson wrote to the Southampton City Art Gallery inquiring about the series. She related that before moving from Southampton under the threat of the Blitzkrieg, she would frequently visit the seven prints, then displayed in the local library. Hodgkinson confesses that as a child she was always “fascinated” by the plates and laments that she knew nothing about them, not even the name of their creator.¹⁷¹ She wrote the letter in the hope of learning something about the images that had lived in her memory for over fifty years. She ends the letter by saying poignantly, “I do hope that these drawings survived the war, like me...”¹⁷²

Her touching relationship with the series was undoubtedly strengthened by the tragic loss of her home and the horrors of the Second World War that soon followed. As new rumblings of war were felt across Europe, purchases of the *Dance* increased during the late 1930s, after the initial surge in the early 1920s.¹⁷³ Like those who first saw the series immediately after the First World War, Hodgkinson and her contemporaries were struck by Smith’s vivid imagery born from his own aesthetic of direct experience.

While in France, Smith remained observant, recording the duckboards, shell holes, and broken trees that both embody and evoke the tragedy of the conflict. He carried these apt perceptions into the *Dance*, anchoring its allegory within the concrete reality of the war's

¹⁷¹ Letter from Mrs Sybil-Elaine Hodgkinson to the curator of the Southampton Art Gallery March 18, 1993.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Smith recorded his sales in a ledger held by the Percy Smith Foundation.

physical effects. In juxtaposing the real with the imagined, Smith visualizes for the British public the soldier's unique relationship with mortality. The hovering figure of Death and the constant fear it implants gains immediacy through the authenticity of the setting. In viewing these seven prints, the British public not only acquired a material understanding of the war but also caught a glimpse of what was internally experienced.

As in the works of his contemporaries Duhamel, Nevinson, Sassoon and others, Smith pushed the brutal reality of the soldier's experience to the front of the British public's consciousness. However, the Official War Artists and soldier-poets introduced the realities of modern war during the conflict, while Smith sought to remind the public during the post-war period. The series is an uncomfortable commemoration which makes explicit the soldier's real sacrifice and prevents its casual dismissal. Looking at the seven prints, the viewer witnesses the chaos of a bombardment, indescribable suffering, the obliteration of the French landscape, and most importantly, the dread of an inescapable death. Smith's series enabled the British public to gain a degree of experiential understanding of this trauma through his own first-hand experience.

The series portrays the worst of human emotions: dread, terror, hatred, and sorrow. Yet it invokes the best sentiment: empathy. This was Smith's ultimate goal in giving the world his aesthetic of direct experience. He hoped that the series would remain pertinent and continue to disrupt inaccurate, preconceived notions of war; he achieved his goal in 1921 and again in the 1930s, as Hodgkinson attests. Even one-hundred years later, the finely etched series continues to fulfil its purpose to remind new viewers "*of the truth of a great happening and what man went through...to...inspire to a greater imaginative sympathy with humanity in general.*"¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ "A Modern Dance of Death," *International Studio*, April 1922, 139-142.

CATALOGUE: *DANCE OF DEATH 1914-1918**Death Forbids* (Figure 4):

The series opens with a print establishing an elementary fact for viewers: Death is the presiding force on the battlefields of World War I. This message was not lost on Smith's audience. A reviewer for *International Studio* in 1922 captioned the image, "No man's will but Death's own is master here."¹⁷⁵ While traditional Dances of Death largely express Death's actions as violent abductions or mischievous sabotages, Smith's protagonist manifests itself more as a lingering, sentient presence.

Death and a British soldier appear in the foreground, rendered in a rich, inky chiaroscuro, immediately drawing the viewer's eye. The soldier's crisis is twofold: his torso is trapped underneath the limb of a fallen tree and his legs are entangled in barbed wire. Lifting his head, he reaches out with his right hand trying to catch the attention of the three stretcher bearers exiting the far left of the scene. The distant, faintly-etched figures appear like fleeting apparitions. The blasted trunk of the tree beside him echoes the raised arm and hides his fruitless gesture from their sight. Lifeless trees pepper the horizon, their brokenness echoing the soldier's hopeless predicament.

Death leans a skeletal left hand on the trunk of the fallen tree, adding to its pressing weight. His right arm stretches out, mirroring the soldier, and hovers above his outstretched fingers. Momentarily he will lower the soldier's arm, denying salvation. In the *Print Collectors Quarterly* in 1921, Campbell Dodgson asserted that Death, "touches his [the soldier's] agitated hand with a firm gesture of restraint."¹⁷⁶ To the contrary, Death's open hand still hovers, and

¹⁷⁵ *International Studio*, 140.

¹⁷⁶ Dodgson, "Mr. Percy Smith's," 325.

casts shadows across the Tommy's skin. In doing so, Smith preserves the instant before Death's definitive touch.

Smith illustrates a common soldier's story. It was frequently too dangerous to retrieve wounded men from no-mans-land. When stretcher bearers were finally dispatched, the wounded may have been too weak to call out. This was British soldier EG Williams' experience after being injured in the field. He wrote, "I opened my eyes ... I remember making a tremendous effort like a nightmare to make a noise ... I grunted..."¹⁷⁷ Fortunately for Williams, there was another soldier nearby who was able to hear his feeble grunts. Private John Duesbery, however, was less lucky and his fate better matches the one illustrated by Smith. Duesbery was found in September of 1917 presumably in a shell hole. In his pocket was a notebook. On the page dated September 16th, he wrote,

I am laid in a shell hole with 2 wounds in my hip and through my back. I cannot move or crawl. I have been here for 24 hours and never seen a living soul. I hope you will receive these few lines as I don't expect anyone will come to take me away.¹⁷⁸

By depicting the moment before death, Smith encourages his viewers to contemplate the soldier's existence more than his inevitable demise. The soldier's final moments are filled with strong, vacillating emotions. He senses Death's proximity. This fear propels him to reach out in desperation to the passing medics. The soldier's fleeting and vain hope contrasts with the solemn determination of Death. By including the stretcher bearers, Smith augments the drama, providing the viewer with more opportunities to feel sympathy through experiential understanding. In this first, tone-setting print, Smith poignantly illustrates the complicated, ongoing relationship soldiers had with Death's ubiquitous, battlefield presence.

¹⁷⁷ EG Williams, reel 3, 11:11.

¹⁷⁸ Watson, "Battle of the Somme," <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-36149839>

Death Marches (Figure 5):

Smith's comments on the production of this print were later published in Earnest Lumsden's *The Art of Etching* in 1925. His note reads, "Was transferred to the plate, as I particularly desired to obtain a certain precision and regularity to help the subject. A clear drawing helped me to express slow and regular movement."¹⁷⁹ This monolithic moving troop of soldiers was a popular theme among war artists to express the homogeneity of the soldier experience.

The print depicts a passing column of British soldiers marching shoulder to shoulder in rows of four. On the other side of the procession, Death walks alone, towering over the servicemen. The setting of this print is intentionally ambiguous. Although a hint of dirt underneath Death's skeletal feet suggests he walks along the edge of a trench and wisps of smoke at the upper right hand corner connote danger, Smith has left the composition relatively bare. No mounds of dirt or lines of grass appear on the ground next to Death. Instead, the figures walk within a white void. Wherever the soldiers are headed, Smith foreshadows the dangers awaiting them by placing Death beside them. Whereas previous Dances of Death show Death battling the soldier or leading him into the line of fire, Smith shows Death more as a constant companion and not a combatant.

C.R.W. Nevinson addressed the same subject in several works such as *Column on the March*, *Returning to the Trenches*, and *A Dawn 1914* (Figure 21). His soldiers are jagged, sharp automatons whose geometric forms echo the machinery of modern warfare. Stafford Leake, a friend of Smith and an art critic, published his opinion on the difference between Smith's

¹⁷⁹ Lumsden, *The Art of Etching*, 354.

approach to the motif and that of modernists like Nevinson. He asserted that Smith's adaptation is "intensely human."¹⁸⁰ Unlike Nevinson's machine-like "nothingness," Smith presents soldiers as a "being."¹⁸¹ While Smith's naturalism avoids any equation with robotic machinery, he does in this print maintain a sense of anonymity that Nevinson also conveys.¹⁸² Smith hides each man's face in a lost profile as they march on a slight incline to the left. The viewer watches a sea of steel helmets, upright rifles, and heavy backpacks whose straps each man identically clutches. These are not portraits of one specific unit, but rather generic Tommies. By doing this, Smith asserts that all soldiers felt the close presence of Death while also reminding the viewer of the thousands that finally met him.

¹⁸⁰ Leake, "War and Peace," 219.

¹⁸¹ Ibid

¹⁸² Smith was a great admirer of Nevinson so it is possible that Smith's own march was influenced by the Vorticist's version.

Death Awed (Figure 6):

Death Awed was the most popular print of the series during Smith's lifetime, and the most frequently reproduced image in reviews. Sometimes it was the only illustrated piece. For instance, it appeared alone in a review by Campbell Dodgson in the *Print Collector's Quarterly* in 1921. Additionally, at an exhibition of modern British engravings at the Louvre in 1927, it was the sole print from the series that was chosen for inclusion. For the accompanying exhibition catalogue it was one of only forty-three images chosen to be reproduced out of the entire 400 works.¹⁸³ In 1922, *International Studio* dubbed the print the "most impressive of all [in the series], for sheer gripping power and horror..."¹⁸⁴ Indeed, this print is the most graphic of all Smith's war images, including those made in France or in *Twelve Drypoints of the War*.

At least two-thirds of the composition is blank sky which forces the eye downward to the gripping details in the foreground. There, Death stands to the left, looking down at a pair of boots which lie in the lower right-hand corner. One boot remains upright while the other has fallen over. Splintered shins protrude from the footwear. The rest of the body is missing. For Dodgson, this eerie void was symbolic of the worldwide sense of loss, "...nothing could be more tragic, more eloquent of the horror of utter loneliness that war has left behind it."¹⁸⁵ The war in many ways can be defined by absence: the absence of men in England, of body parts, of trees and grass on battlefields, and the absence of the sense of hope and self-assurance that many had felt before the war.

The print's sense of loss is further enhanced by the sparseness of the composition. Smith includes no trees, barbed wire posts, or even shell holes. There is just the duckboard path which

¹⁸³ Campbell Dodgson, *Exposition de la gravure moderne anglaise* (Paris: Musée des arts décoratifs, 1927), 34.

¹⁸⁴ *International Studio*, 141.

¹⁸⁵ Dodgson, "Mr. Percy Smith's," 325.

recedes into the distance.¹⁸⁶ The landscape is completely flat, which makes the verticality of Death seem abrupt and out of place. It also magnifies the discomfort of not seeing a balancing, vertical figure emerging from the pair of boots.

The shattered leg bones emerging from the boots echo the skinless feet of Death who stands beside the remains. Presumably, Death was walking along the duckboard when he came upon the scene and was compelled to stop and look. His body continues to face forward while his head turns downward to the right to stare at the boots. The title indicates that Death is amazed by the power of mechanical warfare. However, his body language also suggests the feeling of shock. At the moment of discovery, both Death's shoulders and his right hand instinctively rise in a gesture of surprise. His mouth parts slightly, and above his empty eye sockets, two short horizontal lines mimic raised eyebrows. His left hand clutches his robes, pulling them tighter across his chest. This protective gesture suggests that Death also feels at least a tinge of discomfort.

While the scene would have been shocking for civilians, it was common enough for soldiers. Smith probably saw something similar during his time in France. John Mesefield, a volunteer for the Red Cross, recalled encountering a comparable scene while in Mensil, where Smith frequently visited. He writes, "We got out at Mesnil... raw and filthy and littered with bits of man ... boots with feet in them... legs with boots on them seemed to be everywhere."¹⁸⁷ In a note, Smith recorded that this print "was etched almost entirely at one sitting."¹⁸⁸ Considering

¹⁸⁶ Duckboards were a common motif in Smith's war art. His wife explains that after the difficult winter of 1916, the thaw flooded most of no man's land. The duckboards became the only thing keeping men from getting stuck or drowning. Duckboards appear in, *Winter-Whence*, *Digging Party*, and *The Long Trail Back*. This provides an instance where the series was made by looking at sketches made in-situ.

¹⁸⁷ M. Delf, *A War Record of the Great War*, 5.

¹⁸⁸ Lumsden, *The Art of Etching*, 354.

how lengthy his creation process usually was, the rapidity of production suggests that Smith felt especially compelled to depict it.¹⁸⁹

Smith certainly anticipated the empathetic power his unsettling image would have had on the English viewer. The popularity of the print reveals that something in Death's reaction spoke to them. His human response probably echoed their own complex reaction to the scene. Perhaps they also felt disgust mingled with astonishment. Additionally, having Death himself be halted by the barbarism of modern warfare is a strong comment on the ethics of war.

¹⁸⁹ Stafford Leake talks at length about Smith's process of production in his article.

Death Refuses (Figure 7):

In 1935, during a meeting over coffee, artist László Moholy-Nagy told Smith that he thought this print was “the best and most impressive of modern aims in art.”¹⁹⁰ This high praise was probably inspired by the harmony of the composition and the profound pathos which Smith skillfully instills.

Two soldiers lie at the bottom of a narrow trench, one has already succumbed while the other still struggles. The living soldier lies entangled with his dead comrade, unable to twist his leg out from under the weight. Both men wear gas masks, indicating that their suffering is the result of a chemical attack. At the lower right-hand corner is an object partially hidden in shadow. Its pointed end and reflective metallic surface suggest that it may be a gas shell or capsule. The gnarled, blistered right hand, front and center, of the deceased shows signs of an encounter with chemical gas.

As a veteran who received training for such attacks and who lived through at least one himself, Smith purposely placed these soldiers in the most vulnerable position. An observation by British officer Martin Greener explains their particular danger, “You see if you got to the bottom of the trench you got the full blast of it [the gas] because it was heavy stuff, it went down.”¹⁹¹ Trapped in the low, confined space, the writhing soldier reaches out to be taken by Death.

In the center, the trench walls converge slightly, forming an inverted triangle with Death standing at the top, his back resolutely turned to the viewer and the victims. Like a keystone, this wedge intersects the pyramidal composition below made from the moribund soldier and his dead

¹⁹⁰ Percy Smith, *Diary*, July 25 1935, 63.

¹⁹¹ Martin Greener, “Voices of the First World War: Gas Attack at Ypres,” *Imperial War Museum*, last accessed 4/5/2020 <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-gas-attack-at-ypres>.

companion. Both configurations are predominantly white, which contrasts with the black trench walls. Meeting at the convergence of these two triangles is the outstretched, blistered hand of the soldier. Its dark modelling contrasts with the gleaming white of Death's shrouded shoulders. The soldier pleads for an end, desperately desiring Death's relieving touch. However, Death turns away, unwilling to grant this small mercy.

The print is unique in its presentation of Death as a savior. The pleading gesture of the soldier echoes the one used in *Death Forbids*, where he likewise attempts to call for aid (Figure 4). Smith signifies Death's ability to grant salvation in the form of relief through the juxtaposition of deep, dramatic blacks with bright whites. Death's shroud is the lightest part of the composition by far. The cloth is so tightly stretched across his thin back and skull that it requires almost no shading, furthering the contrast. This motif appears frequently in art history and appears in the oeuvre of Smith's favorite artists like Goya and Rembrandt.

Army surgeon Georges Duhamel wrote of the Western Front in his *New Book of Martyrs* "Life here is entirely reduced to terms of suffering."¹⁹² Smith and other veterans understood this existence, but the British public did not. In order to convey this trauma to his audience, Smith presents them with a figure who is in such incredible pain that he readily chooses death. In this print, Smith proves that it is the living who provide more opportunities for contemplation than the dead. Looking at the print, the viewer receives no experiential understanding from the figure lying in the corner. Instead, they focus on the soldier desperately trying to find relief. It is this act of suffering which is key to making this series the practice in empathy that Smith wanted it to be.

¹⁹² Duhamel, *New Lives of Martyrs*, 57-58.

Death Waits (Figure 8):

The absence of soldiers makes this print unique. Death sits alone in the midst of a bombardment, verifying that the protagonist of the series is Death itself. He guides viewers through the fields that he stalks as fervently as he does the soldiers.

Death sits on a mound of dirt at the top of the composition. From his perch, he is able to survey the devastated land before him. Inestimable bombardments have churned the terrain, rendering it a rolling mass. A shell hole in the lower left-hand corner is filled with water, suggesting that it had been made prior to the current barrage. The posts supporting the barbed wire have nearly been buried by the disturbed ground. On either side of Death, sprays of dirt erupt as shells burst all around. Tightly packed, parallel lines delineate the explosions, similar to the bursts in the background of C.R.W. Nevinson's *After a Push* (Figure 25). The force of the eruptions causes Death's robe to flutter on either side of his bent legs. Thick clouds of smoke hang above him. The fullness of the composition evokes the chaos of artillery fire for the inexperienced viewer.

For the soldier, bombardments were a ubiquitous menace. The strain they caused was so infamous that it gave name to the first medical recognition of post-traumatic stress. Many veterans have spoken about bombardments and shell-shock. Private Donald Price, in his recollection, additionally comments on the British public's ignorance of the trauma caused by the attacks:

Not for a minute but for probably two or three days on the run. If you are standing under a bombardment for so long and you're seeing fellows going up in the air and you've got to stick it for a couple or three days it isn't funny... I mean people just don't understand what a barrage is, you know. The din, the row, the swishing of the shells you could hear them coming. You'd hear shells coming towards you and you'd know very well it's

going to burst here or there. And not one shell but hundreds of shells over the area and all of a sudden you might find yourself alone; everything else has gone west...¹⁹³

The quote reinforces what Smith and many other war artists and authors were trying to do. They were attempting to bring the trauma of the war to the home front, not to terrify the British public, but to make them aware of what the war really was. Creating the series after the war, Smith is trying to make sure that they do not forget.

The symptoms of shell-shock varied. Soldier Clifford Lane states that “people being dazed, lying on a firestep... after a bombardment” was one of the most common forms.¹⁹⁴ At a distance, Death looks as if he may be one of those paralyzed men. However, a closer look shows that he takes subtle pleasure in the cacophony. His mouth, formed of a small line, turns slightly upwards – hinting at a smile.¹⁹⁵ His cheekbones reach nearly to his nose and mimic laugh lines. Looking directly at the viewer he smiles, enjoying the barrage and knowing that although he waits, it will not be for long.

¹⁹³ Donald Price, “Voices of the First World War: Shell Shock,” *Imperial War Museum*, last accessed 4/5/2020, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-shell-shock>.

¹⁹⁴ Clifford Lane, “Voices,” last accessed 4/5/2020, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-shell-shock>.

¹⁹⁵ M. Delf, *A Record of the Great War*, 34.

Death Ponders (Figure 9):

The original title of the penultimate image in Smith's Dance of Death was *Death Hesitates*.¹⁹⁶ By changing the verb from "hesitate" to "ponder," Smith altered the print's tone. Hesitation happens in a matter of seconds. Pondering, however, is a lengthy action, requiring time and solitude. Smith's entire series possesses the same sense of stillness, allowing the viewer to contemplate along with Death.

The vast empty sky sharpens Death's silhouette as he stands in a shell hole. Below him, a soldier lies on his stomach. The Tommy struggles to pull himself out, his hands searching for a grip in the wet dirt. He has already reached the edge of the hole and only needs the strength to pull himself over the rim. However, his back legs lie twisted and useless behind him. He wears his gas mask in anticipation of the miasma slowly rolling towards him from the right. In a note, Smith reveals that in the print's fourth state, the soldier's face was darkened. Intentionally obscuring the face echoes Death's cowed head, which looks off into the distance.

The print conveys the surreal nature of a gas attack. From his diary, it is known that Smith had at least one encounter with the weapon.¹⁹⁷ He witnessed what Canadian soldier A. T. Hunter records at the first gas attack at Ypres in April 1915,

... a series of sharp puffs of white smoke and then trundling along with the wind came the queer greenish-yellow fog that seemed strangely out of place in the bright atmosphere of that clear April day. It reached the parapet, paused, gathered itself like a wave and ponderously lapped over into the trenches.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Percy Smith, *Ledger*, 34.

¹⁹⁷ Smith, *War Diary*, 15.

¹⁹⁸ A. T. Hunter, "First-hand Accounts of the First Chlorine Gas Attack," ed Sarah Everts, *100 Years of Chemical Weapons*, <http://chemicalweapons.cenmag.org/first-hand-accounts-of-the-first-chlorine-gas-attack/>

In the print, both Death and the fog possess the same ease. Death is shown mid-step with both heels risen from the ground and both knees slightly bent. He had been moving slowly and stealthily as does the low-lying cloud behind him. From this precarious position, Death pauses and gathers himself as Hunter recorded the cloud did. The mirrored movement of the two reflect for the viewer that Death came in many forms for the soldier. At times it was chemical weapons. Other times it was artillery as in *Death Awed* or in a melee, as in *Death Intoxicated* (Figures 6 & 10).

This image reinforces the difference in tone between Smith's Dance of Death and most other examples. As *International Studio* pointed out in 1922, a primary difference between Smith's Dance and Holbein's is the lack of "humor" and "occasional satire."¹⁹⁹ In another series, perhaps Death might be shown blowing the gas forward, his lipless mouth revealing a perpetual smile. Instead, Smith's Death shrouds himself in an act of solemnity if not reverence. In this print the shroud is pulled tighter to his chest by his right hand, and his head is completely covered.

¹⁹⁹ *International Studio*, 141.

Death Intoxicated (Figure 10):

In 1922, *International Studio* acknowledged that in Smith's final print, "'The Dance of Death' becomes a reality."²⁰⁰ Death's six acts of mediation and solemnity are abandoned in this last act where he finally channels the spirit of his medieval counterparts, throwing off his shroud as he kicks, jumps, and howls.

Delineated with thick, dark linework, a Tommy, brandishing a bayonet, rushes towards a kneeling German, aiming at his torso. The enemy soldier is unarmed and his right-hand gestures in surprise as he turns his head and helplessly watches. Behind them, Death stands with his right foot on relevé and his left leg raised and bent at the knee. His back arches, pushing his chest triumphantly outward. His arms rise in opposition to his legs, his left arm is straight while his right arm is bent. It is easy to imagine marionette strings leading from his skeletal fingers to the German and British combatants below. Death's bone-white figure is achieved with a lighter line, making him the brightest point of the image. He carries out his exuberant dance amid a swirling, gaseous cloud.

Below Death, a faintly-rendered sea of war-crazed soldiers is visible, the melee mingling with the fog. Soldiers charge with rifles in their hands, rushing to take enemy trenches. Some have already engaged in combat. Nearest to the British soldier's left leg, two soldiers are locked in battle. One stands over the other, driving a bayonet into his side, while the victim holds up his left arm pleading for mercy. In this final print, it appears that Death emits his own deadly vapor that turns men into monsters. An anonymous quote from a British soldier provides a fitting commentary on the image:

²⁰⁰ *International Studio*, 141.

At first, going out, I regarded the Huns in a kind of ‘we’re enemies - but we needn’t be nasty’ sort of way, until a shell burst in a bay where six of my section were. I went in to see and get the names and numbers and then I felt that cold, murderous hatred of the Hun that every Tommy must have who’s been under heavy shell and rifle fire.²⁰¹

Death became a reality for that soldier. Like gas, violence and hatred spread in the form of death. Upon experiencing it, one is necessarily changed. Death intoxicates just as much as he becomes intoxicated.

By showing a British soldier killing a German, Smith accomplishes two things. First, he continues to illustrate the common experiences of the British serviceman. Most importantly, however, it becomes a way to elicit the sense of empathy for which Smith strives. For his British public, Smith presents the Hun also as a victim. Looking at the imminent death of their “enemy” forces them to remember that Germany is facing an identical wave of loss and grief. While the previous quote illustrates the action of the image, the following quote given by a British soldier probably better explains the sentiment that Smith hoped to evoke:

That duty which compels you to kill a man does not compel you to hate him. Of the two, hating is the worst lapse from humanity.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Unknown, Audio installation, First World War Galleries, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom, January 2020.

²⁰² Unknown, Audio installation, First World War Galleries, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom, January 2020.

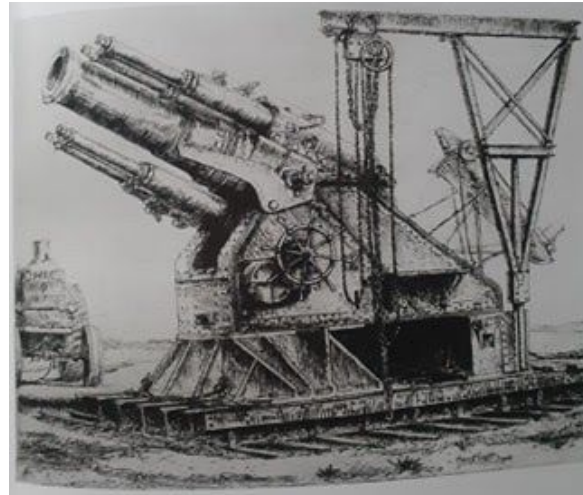
FIGURES

Figure 1:



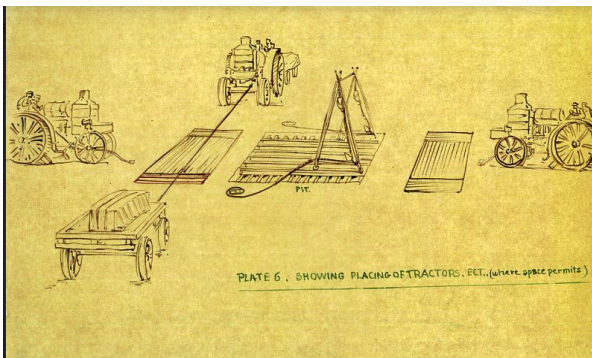
Percy Delf Smith, *sketches*, c. 1912, pencil on paper, Percy Smith Foundation

Figure 2:



Percy Delf Smith, *15" Howitzer*, c.1916, etching, Percy Smith Foundation

Figure 3:



Percy Delf Smith, *Plate 6: Showing Placing of Tractors from The Howitzer Drill*, 1917, pen on paper, Percy Smith Foundation

Figure 4:



Percy Delf Smith, *Death Forbids* from *Dance of Death 1914-1918*, 1919, etching, Percy Smith Foundation

Figure 5:



Percy Delf Smith, *Death Marches* from *Dance of Death 1914-1918*, 1919, etching, Percy Smith Foundation

Figure 6:



Percy Delf Smith, *Death Awed* from *Dance of Death 1914-1918*, 1919, etching, Percy Smith Foundation

Figure 7:



Percy Delf Smith, *Death Refuses* from *Dance of Death 1914-1918*, 1919, etching, Percy Smith Foundation

Figure 8:



Percy Delf Smith, *Death Waits* from *Dance of Death 1914-1918*, 1919, etching, Percy Smith Foundation

Figure 9:



Percy Delf Smith, *Death Ponders* from *Dance of Death 1914-1918*, 1919, etching, Percy Smith Foundation

Figure 10:



Percy Delf Smith, *Death Intoxicated* from *Dance of Death 1914-1918*, 1919, etching, Percy Smith Foundation

Figure 11:



Percy Delf Smith, *Solitude (The Lone Tree)*, 1919, Percy Smith Foundation

Figure 12:



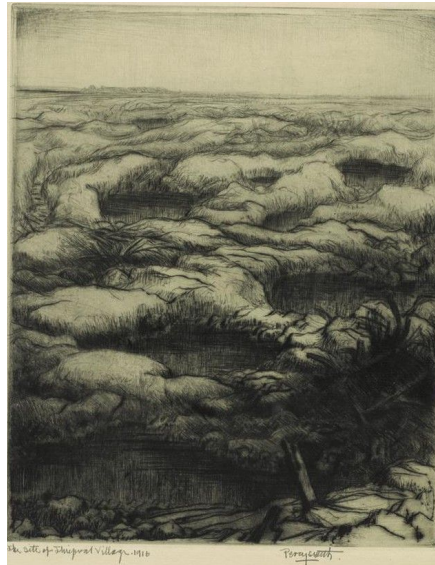
Jean-Francois Millet, *Man with a Hoe*, 1860-1862, black chalk and white chalk heightening on buff paper, The J Paul Getty Museum

Figure 13:



Jean-Francois Millet, *The Angelus*, 1857-1859, oil on canvas, The Musee d'Orsay

Figure 14:



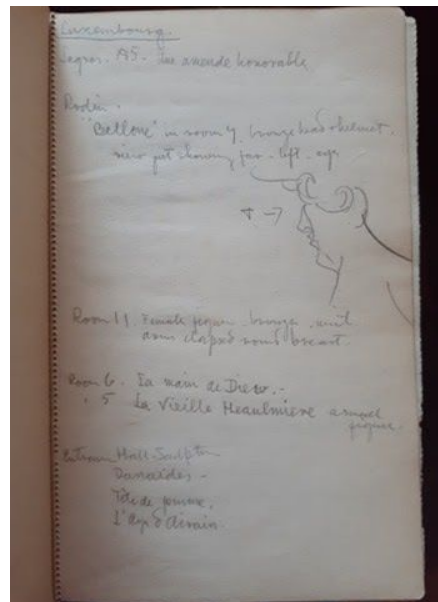
Percy Delf Smith, *The Ruins of Thiepval – Main Street*, 1918, drypoint etching on paper, Imperial War Museum

Figure 15:



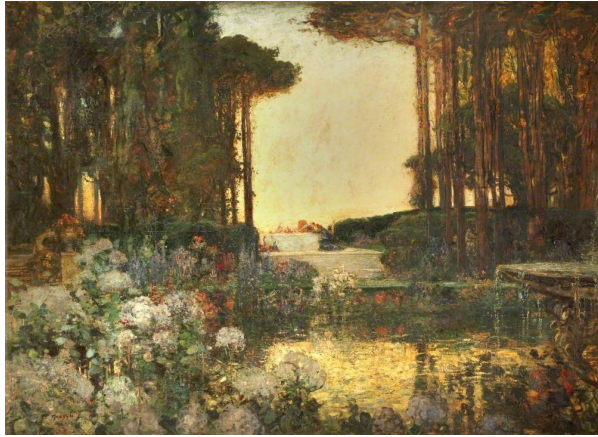
Percy Delf Smith, *Dreams on the Dugout*, 1918, drypoint etching on paper, Imperial War Museum

Figure 16:



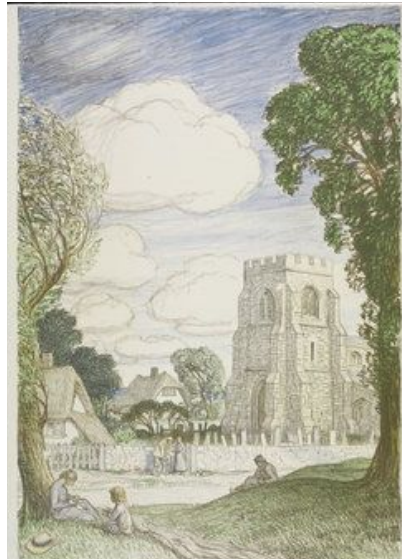
Percy Delf Smith, *Bellona sketch*, c 1912, pencil on paper, Percy Smith Foundation

Figure 17:



Tom Mostyn, *The Garden of Peace*, 1915, oil on canvas, Walker Art Gallery

Figure 18:



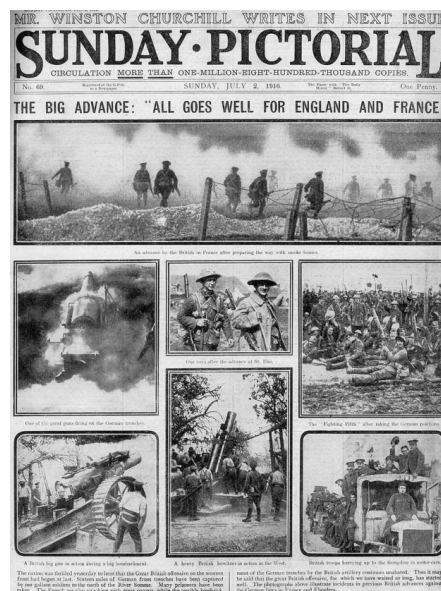
George Clausen, *The Wish*, 1916, color lithograph, The Victoria and Albert Museum

Figure 19:



British, *Matchbox Holder*, 1915, metal, plastic, paper, Imperial War Museum

Figure 20:



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Paul Nash, *Menin Road*, 1919, oil on canvas, Imperial War Museum

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David Young Cameron's *The Battlefield of Ypres*, 1919, oil on canvas, Imperial War Museum

Figure 25:



C.R.W. Nevinson, *After a Push*, 1917, oil on canvas, Imperial War Museum

Figure 26:



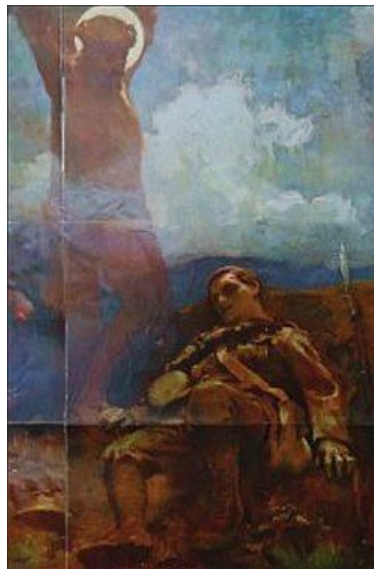
Wyndham Lewis, *A Battery Shelled*, 1919, oil on canvas, Imperial War Museum

Figure 27:



Charles Sims, *Sacrifice*, 1918, oil on canvas, Canadian War Museum

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James Clark, *The Great Sacrifice*, 1914, lithograph, location unknown

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James Clark, *The Great Sacrifice*, 1919, stained glass, Saint Mary Magdalen, Enfield, England

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C.R.W. Nevinson, *Paths of Glory*, 1917, oil on canvas, Imperial War Museum

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Figure 44:



Hans Holbein, *The Abbess from The Dance of Death*, 1538, woodcut

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Hans Holbein, *The Miser* from *The Dance of Death*, 1538, woodcut

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Thomas Rowlandson, *The Law Overthrown* from *The English Dance of Death*, 1815, etching

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William Strang, *Death and the Robber* from *The Doings of Death*, 1901, woodcut, National Galleries of Scotland

Figure 48:



William Strang, *Death and the Husbandman* from *The Doings of Death*, 1901, woodcut, National Galleries of Scotland

Figure 49:



Hans Holbein, *The Knight*, 1538, woodcut

Figure 50:



Such is, alas, the common Story
Of Blood & Wounds, of Death & Glory.

Thomas Rowlandson, *The Battle from The English Dance of Death*, 1903, etching

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