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“The horror of war”

Great art provides some of the most valuable experiences it is possible for us to have. Such experiences engage many aspects of our mental life simultaneously: filling our senses whilst at the same time making demands on our intelligence, our sympathies, and our emotions (Matravers, 1998, p. 1).

The general concept of the exhibition “The Horror of War” is to demonstrate how artists at different times reflected the themes of war, suffering, loss, poverty and destruction. Each art work in the exhibition explores the impact of military conflicts on individuals and society as a whole, evoking strong emotional reactions and forcing viewers to reflect on the consequences of war.

The exhibition will take place at the Imperial War Museum North (IWM), Manchester. This museum specializes in the history of conflict, from the First World War to contemporary conflicts, and their impact on societies. Purpose-built to tell powerful stories of over a century of war, IWM North makes full use of its extraordinary architecture to deliver an award-winning immersive experience - is stated on the official website IWM North (2024). The exhibition “The Horror of War” fits into this context, as it aims to show the deep personal and social consequences of military conflicts through artworks. This context allows viewers not only to perceive the exhibition as a collection of artworks, but also as a tool to help them better understand military history and its impact on human destinies.

Figure 1 shows a map of the exhibition. The temporary walls repeat the sharp corners of the existing columns, and the corridor widens and narrows. This adds to the sense of danger and discomfort, but at the same time, the 'wide corridors' have enough space to see the works of

art both up close and from a distance, and the 'narrow' corridors seem to lead the viewer through the exhibition.

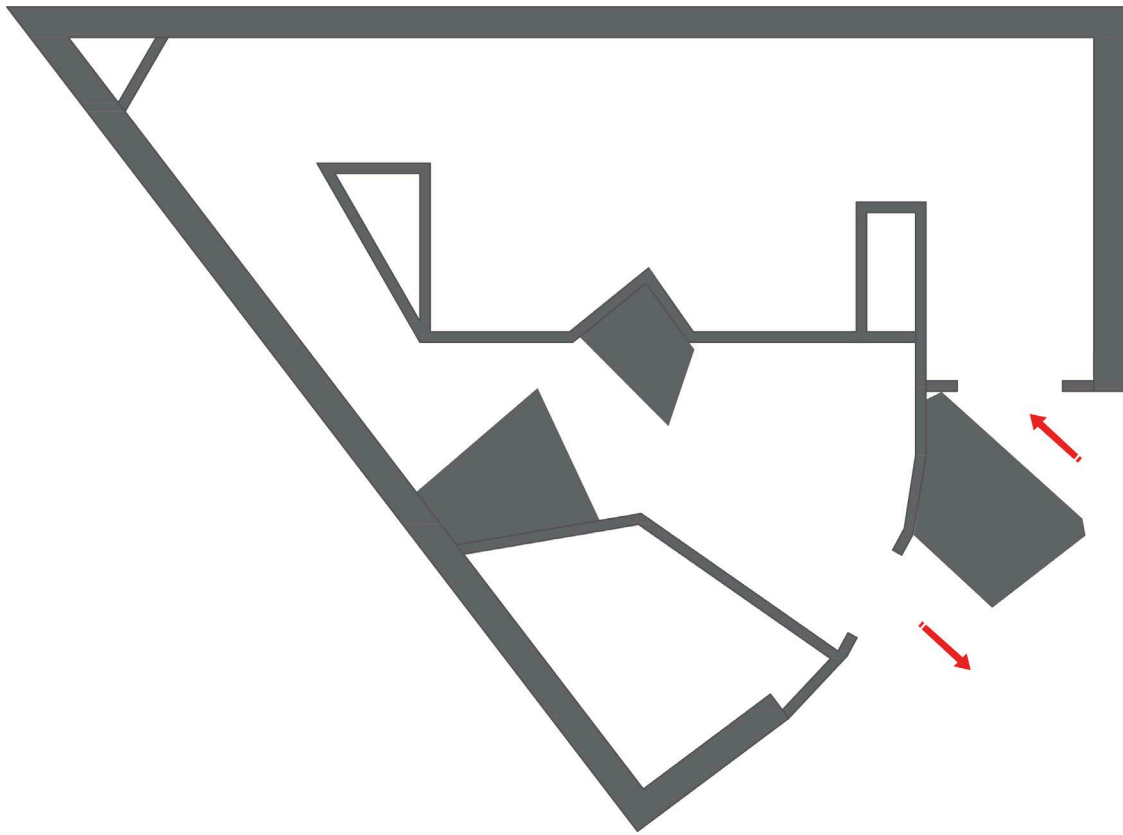


Figure 1: Anastasiia Muzyka, 2024. *Schematic map of the exhibition.*

The exhibition will feature 5 works of art that the viewer will encounter in the following sequence: 'Youth Mourning' Clausen, 'Guernica' Picasso, 'Hunger' Kollwitz, 'Korean Mother' Fangor, 'The Face of War' Dali.



Figure 2: Anastasiia Muzyka, 2024. *Map of the exhibition.*



Figure 3: George Clausen, 1916. *Youth Mourning* [oil on canvas]. 914 x 914 mm. At: Imperial War Museum.

“A naked young woman, personifying Youth, kneels in a grief-stricken attitude before a wooden cross marking a grave. In the distance are the flooded craters of a battlefield” - is stated on Imperial War Museum [IWM], (2024).

“The painting was reportedly triggered by the death in 1915 of Second Lieutenant Geraint Payne, the fiancé of Kit Clausen, the artist’s daughter” (Einhaus and Baxter, 2017). Although George Clausen was an official war artist and highlighted the horror of war that affected everyone, it can also be argued that this painting demonstrates a personal loss for the author and his family.

The dark colours evoke sadness and hopelessness. The woman's naked body is bent as if in pain, she is on her knees, grief-stricken and crying, holding her head in despair in front of an uninscribed wooden cross. This can symbolise both her personal loss and the loss of every woman, whose loved one did not return from the war. The harsh and barren landscape emphasises the grief and emptiness of death and the loss of future life (De Morgan, 2021).



Figure 4: Pablo Picasso, 1937. *Guernica* [oil on canvas]. 349,3 x 776,6 cm. At: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia.

According to Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (2024), Pablo Picasso's motivation for painting the scene in this great work was the news of the German aerial bombing of the Basque town whose name the piece bears. Despite that, neither the studies nor the finished picture contain a single allusion to a specific event, constituting instead a generic plea against the barbarity and terror of war. The huge picture is conceived as a giant poster, testimony to the horror that the Spanish Civil War was causing and a forewarning of what was to come in the Second World War. The muted colours, the intensity of each and every one of the motifs and the way they are articulated are all essential to the extreme tragedy of the scene, which would become the emblem for all the devastating tragedies of modern society.

"Every community in the world that has suffered an appalling atrocity has become synonymous with Guernica..." (Hensbergen, 2013, p.5).

With its complexity and chaos, the painting's symbolism is reminiscent of war itself. The canvas is designed in an abstract cubist style, which deliberately emphasises the two-dimensionality of the canvas. In the context of this painting, the style increases the scale of tragedy, violence and destruction. The painting also depicts several human figures, many of which are fragmented and distorted (Gillespie, 2019). This actually demonstrates the destroyed houses and destroyed people.



Figure 5: Kathe Kollwitz, 1924. *Hunger* [woodcuts].

The disastrous social conditions of the 1920s - inflation, strikes, immense unemployment and malnutrition - engaged all of Kathe Kollwitz' powers as artist-advocate. She used the arsenal of her art to protest and plead for the dispossessed (Prelinger, 1992, p.111).

Figure 3 shows woodcut from of the early 20s is the stark *Hunger*, in which we see a woman stripped to the raw edge of existence in postwar Germany where unemployment, hunger and disease were widespread. The woman's breasts droop low and dry and she cannot feed child from her own emaciated body. She lifts her hands to her head in despair as her child lies bloated and starving in her lap (Arthur, 2015).

The woodcuts technique allows it to achieve such a stature. Her woodcuts are characterized by clear lines, strong contrasts, and expressive representation. Kollwitz used the woodcut to enhance and emphasize her views, depicting her figures and environments with sharp edges and powerful shadows. The woodcut allowed her to convey her message directly and unambiguously (Kaethe Kollwitz Museum, 2024).



Figure 6: Wojciech Fangor, 1951. *Korean Mother*. [oil on canvas]. 150 x 200 cm. At: Warsaw National Museum.

Korean Mother is a monumental canvas in the style of Polish socialist realism (the style promoting Soviet propaganda), maintained in almost monochromatic grey and earthy tones. The image has a triangular compositional arrangement (Culture.pl, 2014).

Korean Mother depicts a little boy grieving over the body of his dead mother: from his puzzled expression it appears he does not fathom what is happening to his life. Against the desolate

gray mountains in the background, several columns of smoke rise in distant villages that must have been destroyed by American bombs during World War II. The mother is lying prone in the foreground and blood is seeping through the deserted terra-cotta colored ground, In the far right corner are pieces of bricks and remnants of building materials (Choi, 2020).

The overall impression of the paint is depressing, showing the death of a young mother as a result of the conflict on the Korean peninsula and the orphaning of a child. The sorrowful gaze of the war orphan is more powerful than any other anti-war message. (The Dong-a, 2019).



Figure 7: Salvador Dali, 1940. *The Face of War*. [oil on canvas]. 64 cm × 79 cm. At: Museum Boijmans van Beuningen.

The Face of War is a surreal vision of the trauma and horror of war and is frequently interpreted as premonition of the Second World War, as it was painted in the period after the Spanish Civil War and just before Second World War breaks out in Spain again. The focus of this Surrealist painting is a disembodied face hovering against a barren desert landscape, with identical faces filling mouth and eye holes. Within the optical illusion, skulls are multiplying in the face holes to infinity thus illustrating feelings of the eternal continuity of death and horror. Surrounding the face are serpents creeping around the empty and abandoned landscape. The emptiness and pessimism of this painting reveals the real sentiments of people exhausted by the never ending destruction of war in Europe (S, 2022, p. 100). Brown demonstrates its negative characteristics, causing feelings of sadness, numbness, emptiness (van Braam, 2024).

“Surrealism aims to revolutionise human experience. It balances a rational vision of life with one that asserts the power of the unconscious and dreams.” – Tate, 2024.

The works of art presented in this exhibition demonstrate the consequences of war, such as loss, destruction, hunger, orphanhood and horror. ‘The Horror of War’ not only demonstrates artistic depictions of war, but also provokes important reflections on the impact of war on human society, emphasising the importance of peace and human life.

It is thanks to the placement in the War Museum that the viewer will see and feel the sadness and pain of such a colossal destruction. I hope that after leaving the exhibition, the viewer will retain the conviction that war is a horror and that every individual and humanity as a whole should strive for peace.

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