

Sir William Orpen (1878–1931)

by Ruben Pang



Sir William Orpen, Self Portrait, 1913

INTRODUCTION

Major Sir William Newenham Montague Orpen was a profoundly successful and versatile portrait painter working in 20th century Britain.¹ He was also commissioned as an official War Artist and served on the Western Front from 1917–1918. During this period, he produced a variety of works from portraits of senior military and political figures to paintings that depicted trench warfare. Following the war, Orpen documented the Paris Peace Conference. His extensive body of work eventually earned him knighthood in 1918 and the recognition of being the most prolific war artist of his time.

EARLY LIFE

Orpen was born in Stillorgan on 27 November 1878 to an affluent protestant home. His early interest in art was supported by his mother, who enrolled him into the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin at the age of 13.² He was a natural artist, winning major accolades for his work during his years in school. At the age of 18, Orpen was accepted into London's Slade School of Fine Art. It was there he associated with equally dynamic contemporaries, including Augustus John and Henry Tonks, both of whom also served as war artists on the Western Front.³

THE INFLUENCE OF IMPRESSIONISM

Sir William Orpen's aesthetic sense was highly influenced by Impressionism, one of the most prominent art movements during the late 19th century. Originating in Paris during the 1870s, the Impressionists were a group of avant-garde painters who sought to create atmosphere and visual effects through gesture and texture.⁴ Adapting this new expression across a variety of genres from landscapes to portraits, their paintings accomplished a heightened sense of vibrancy and movement, often at the expense of detail—emphasis was placed on expressing the sensation of seeing over rendering specific features of a perceived subject.⁵ Essentially, the idea was to capture reality in a way which photography could not.

Impressionists experimented with a diverse range of paint manipulation techniques. They were particularly interested in methods which accommodated spontaneity and speed. A distinguishing mark of an Impressionist painting was the manipulation of short, broken brush-strokes and the use of raw colors.⁶ This approach allowed the figurative nature of any subject

to be captured quickly within one sitting (*alla prima*) and equipped artists with the means to paint outdoors (*en plein air*)—an advantage Orpen applied to his work on the Western Front.

THE WAR ARTIST

Orpen was an influential lecturer in his alma mater, the Metropolitan School of Art, when World War One broke out.⁷ By then, he had already established himself as a versatile and fashionable artist. In British and Irish art scenes Orpen was a renowned draughtsman who synthesized the skills of the Old Masters with a modern flair. Imparting techniques from Slade, Orpen introduced European classical realism to a new generation of Irish artists. Orpen also enjoyed the patronage of wealthy clients and became a member of the New English Art Club through the recommendation of John Singer Sargent, another commissioned war artist.

In 1914, Orpen supported the war effort by contributing his services to fund raising auctions for the Red Cross—where blank canvases were sold to the highest bidder to have their portrait painted. A year into the war, a sense of patriotism compelled him to undertake a commission under the British Army Service Corps.⁸ By dint of his client, Quartermaster General Sir John Cowans, he was given the rank of Second Lieutenant and served briefly as an administrative clerk at Kensington Barracks.⁹ Orpen's artistic expertise



Portrait of a Grenadier Guardsman

was quickly identified by the head of the War Propaganda Bureau, Charles Mastermant, who formally appointed him as a war artist in 1916.¹⁰ Assigned the task of painting the portraits of senior military personnel, Orpen was sent to the trenches along the Western Front in France. Anticipating the need to endorse the artist's autonomy, Cowans facilitated Orpen's promotion to the rank of Major before dispatching him.¹¹

THE WESTERN FRONT

Painting the Ranks. Orpen arrived at the Western Front in

spring 1917. During this period, he continued to paint the portraits of senior military and political figures, as he did in the early stages of the war. His subjects included Winston Churchill, who at the time was the commander of the 6th Battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers; Hugh Trechnard, the commander of the Royal Flying Corps who helped oversee the creation of the Royal Air Force;¹² and Sir Douglas Haig, a controversial general who accomplished an effective British advance along the Western Front which led to the Allied victory in November 1918.¹³ Orpen particularly admired

Sir Douglas Haig's character and they became close friends during the course of war. Orpen described Haig as a "strong man ... (who) understood, knew all, and felt all for his men, that he truly loved them; and (they) loved him."¹⁴ It was Haig who encouraged Orpen to expand his painting repertoire to include the varieties of characters on the front. During a painting session, he said to Orpen, "Why waste your time painting me? Go and paint the men. They're the fellows who are saving the world, and they're getting killed every day."¹⁵

Orpen adapted to the new environmental constraints by approaching his subjects with a sense of economy; a considerable shift from the meticulous romanticized style he was known for. With this bravura style, Orpen's mantra was "A painting well drawn is always well enough painted." The artist Harrington Mann, noted of Orpen's focus on precision and efficiency in his book *The Technique of Portrait Painting*:

"The face of the man before him was like the page of an open book which he read with astonishing insight. He made a literal transcript which he handed on to anyone who cared to know. It is the physical character which is of interest to the painter, but he knows that if he can but get this skin-deep truth, he has got everything ... Even with his Irish sense of humour, Orpen always told the truth. This is real portraiture."¹⁶

Comedy and Tragedy on the Front. Although obliged to focus his efforts on billet portraits, Orpen dedicated a substantial

amount of his practice to stylized studies of war and its ironic incarnations. In *The Mad Woman of Douai* (1918), Orpen depicts a particularly memorable encounter while travelling around St. Quentin, France. In the foreground lie two improperly buried casualties, the eponymous mad woman and her equally disturbed company are juxtaposed against a ruined church's surviving crucifix. Orpen never tried to hide the grim details of war from the viewer, allowing them to see through the eyes of soldiers behind the lines. The narrative to this painting is found in his memoir, *An Onlooker In France*:

"In one spot in the mud at the side of the road lay two British Tommies who had evidently just been killed. They had been laid out ready for something to take them away ... Death all round, and they themselves might be blown into eternity at any moment ... Another day I went to Douai, and there I saw the mad woman. Her son told us she had been quite well until two days before the Boche left, then they had done such things to her that she had lost her reason. There she sat, silent and motionless, except for one thumb which constantly twitched. But if one of us in uniform passed close to



The Mad Woman of Douai, 1918



Theipval, 1917

her, she would give a convulsive shudder. It was sad, this woman with her beautiful, curly-headed son."¹⁷

Orpen's personal touch and choice of subject matter was well received in exhibitions and publications. He captured the front in a way which the cameras could not. The novelist Arnold Bennet, who was an influential affiliate of the War Propaganda Bureau, said of Orpen and his work: "William Orpen, having discovered a new subject, composes it newly ... Landscape, shell-holes, ruined trees and buildings, dug-outs, tents, and the tragedy and comedy of human existence—he sees them as though nobody had ever seen them before; and he arranges them in fresh patterns of contour, colour, plane. His ingenuity in manipulating the material is simply endless, and yet he is never tempted to falsify the material."¹⁸

The War Landscape. World War One was the first fully industrialised war of the twentieth century and the scale of its destruction literally scarred the earth; entire battlefields were rendered unrecognizable. Orpen observed and documented battlefields in different states, from the putrefaction of trench warfare to the beauty of nature's gradual reclamation though the seasons.

In the summer months of 1916, the British and Germans engaged each other in an intense battle in Thiepval, Somme. Orpen returned to the battlefield after a few months to find human remains and fragments of spent equipment amidst fine weather and efflorescence. The abject beauty of this landscape is captured in his painting titled *Theipval* (1917).

Orpen describes the initial environment in *An Onlooker in France*: "I shall never forget my first sight of the Somme battlefields. It was snowing fast, but the ground was not covered, and there was this endless waste of mud, holes and water. Nothing but mud, water, crosses and broken tanks; miles and miles of it, horrible and terrible."¹⁹ And its transformation: "The dreary, dismal mud was baked white and pure-dazzling white. White daisies, red poppies and a blue flower, great masses of them, stretched for miles and miles."²⁰ A similar atmospheric contrast is seen when comparing *Thiepval* (1917) to the adumbrated, lifeless landscape of *Zonnebeke* (1918) and *Dead Germans In A Trench* (1917).

Zonnebeke (1918) is Orpen's depiction of the carnage left behind by the 3rd Battle of Ypres, part of the Passchendaele campaign from June to November 1917. A combination of heavy rain and continuous artillery shelling had turned the area into a muddy swampland. Terrible losses were suffered in repeated attacks and counter-attacks; both sides had each lost 250,000 men.²¹ In November 1917, the British concluded the Passchendaele offensive after pushing their lines only five miles forward.²² By then, *Zonnebeke* was rendered unrecognizable.

Letters, Paintings and Drawings from the Front. Although Orpen's experience of conflict was comfortable compared the conscripted men, he was still brought face-to-face with the



Zonnebeke, 1918

horrors of war on the Western Front.²³ In a letter addressed to his wife Grace, he had described waterlogged trenches, destroyed shell-holes and the accumulation of unburied corpses. As a result of prolonged exposure to this contaminated environment, Orpen contracted blood poisoning in October 1917 and subsequently suffered from influenza. Orpen never fully recovered from these illnesses and continued to suffer from them until his death.²⁴ Despite this, he continued to produce around 125 paintings and drawings, chronicling the war environment and those who endured it.²⁵ He then compiled this collection and presented the entire series as a gift to the nation.²⁶

POST WAR

War Memories. In 1921, Orpen published *An Onlooker In France*, an insightful account of his experiences on the Western

Front containing selected paintings and drawings to supplement the narrative. Orpen wrote passionately of the variety of personalities that he painted; Tommies, Generals and civilians alike. Most notable was his affinity with the men on the front, especially the ordinary soldier, which he describes with fascination and admiration. In "Chapter Two: The Somme," Orpen recalls being deeply affected by the "endless stream of men ... all pressing along with apparently unceasing energy towards the front. Past all the little crosses where their comrades had fallen, nothing daunted, they pressed on towards the Hell that awaited them."²⁷

In contrast, he indicted the political elite, whose avarice and mismanagement of the war resulted in the sacrifice of readily forgotten soldiers. In "Chapter Ten: London," Orpen finds himself disturbed by

the general attitude of the "frocks"; office holders who complained of the burden of war work; long hours, overwork and the inconveniences of air raids. For Orpen, it was clear that the population who had not experienced the front-line could not appreciate the gravity of the sacrifices that the soldiers had made. He was repulsed when the "hand-shakers" spoke of their grievances as though "they were well in the middle of the world war; they were just the same as the fighting man in France or on some other front."²⁸

The Paris Peace Conference.

Following the war, Orpen was appointed the official artist of the Paris Peace Conference, producing *The Peace Conference At The Quai d'Orsay* (1919) and *The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles* (1919).²⁹ It was a sombre affair as the Allies' initial feelings of jubilation had succumbed to an anti-climatic exhaustion. Orpen chose to render these principal scenes with an ominous palette, dwarfing its personages while emphasizing negative space and a vertical gravity. His summary of the event is recorded in "Chapter Fifteen: Paris During The Peace Conference" of *An Onlooker In France*:

"Then, amidst a mass of secretaries from the French Foreign Office, the two Germans, Hermann Müller and Doctor Bell, came nervously forward, signed, and were led back to their places ... All the "frocks" did all their tricks to perfection. President Wilson showed his back

teeth; Lloyd George waved his Asquithian mane; Clemenceau whirled his gray-gloved hands about like windmills; Lansing drew his pictures and Mr. Balfour slept. It was all over. The "frocks" had won the war. The "frocks" had signed the Peace! The Army was forgotten. Some dead and forgotten, others maimed and forgotten, others alive and well—but equally forgotten ...³⁰

Orpen painted a third tribute in reaction to the injustice he felt for the forgotten soldiers. It was also intended to be an allegory of the political elite's administration at the expense of soldiers on the front line. Titled *To the Unknown British*

Soldier in France, it depicts a coffin flanked by two ghostly figures, draped with tattered blankets from the trenches and set in contrast against the ornate background of the Paris Peace Conference. The haunting image's ambiguity garnered mixed reactions from the public and was attacked by the press.³¹ Due to the controversy, Orpen was subsequently required to paint over the images of the dead soldiers. The painting was eventually accepted and exhibited in the Imperial War Museum in 1927.³² Even after its revision, *To the Unknown British Soldier in France* is often cited

as Orpen's most moving painting within the museum's collection.

Critical and Commercial Success. The publicity Orpen received from his War Artist status substantially boosted his reputation. In May 1918, his war paintings exhibition at Agnew's Gallery in London was held in critical acclaim by the Pathé news and drew 10,000 visitors.³³ The general public especially connected with his harsh portrayal of war. Within a year, Orpen was knighted for his contributions in support of the war.³⁴ On a success streak, he returned to portrait painting, enjoying a stream of new commissions that fetched ever-increasing prices. In 1929, he was reported to have earned over £54,000 within the year. Over the course of his career, Orpen produced over 600 paintings, dedicating the majority of his practice to portraiture.

Today, Sir William Orpen is remembered as a frisson of history and personality. Within the art world, his vocations were as varied as his paintings: brilliant student, influential teacher, master portraitist and perhaps the most formidable war artist of the 20th century. 🌐

ENDNOTES

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