



Halt on the March by a Stream at Nesle, Alfred Munnings, 1918
Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum 19710261-0445

Exhibition overview

Introduction

Known for his evocative depictions of English rural and sporting life, Sir Alfred Munnings (1878–1959) was one of England’s most renowned painters of horses.

In 1918, Munnings was invited to join the Canadian War Memorials Fund, created by press baron Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook). As an official war artist working in France, Munnings produced paintings and sketches depicting the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and the Canadian Forestry Corps.

After the war, Munnings said that his experience with the Canadians, and the resulting works of art, were pivotal in establishing him as an influential artist. In addition, his contributions to the Canadian War Memorials Fund remain a poignant reflection of Canada’s First World War experience.

This exhibition, divided into five themes, features 46 works of art by Munnings from the Canadian War Museum collection.

Zone 1 — The Artist: From England to France

Inspired by summer days growing up in the East of England, Alfred Munnings gained a reputation for producing pastoral scenes, portraits and paintings of horses. In 1899, when he was just 20 years old, his work was accepted for the prestigious Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. That same year, Munnings was blinded in his right eye.

Ineligible for active duty during the First World War, Munnings instead contributed to the war effort through the Canadian War Memorials Fund, painting men and horses of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and the Canadian Forestry Corps.

There are six paintings and one sketch in this zone, featuring scenes of troops, bulls and horses at a halt. A self-guided activity in this zone encourages visitors of all ages to explore elements of Munnings's war art.

Zone 2 — The Western Front: Devastation and Beauty

The Western Front — a 700-kilometre-long stretch of shattered land in France and Belgium — was the primary theatre of war for the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Armies fought along the front in protracted battles that resulted in heavy casualties, with little territory gained until August 1918. However, behind the front lines — a mere 10 to 15 kilometres from the devastation — lay untouched farmland and forests.

Munnings was both attracted to and repelled by the Western Front, aware that its destruction lay menacingly over the horizon — out of sight but ever-present. This was the environment he entered in January 1918.

This zone includes paintings depicting the ruins of a château and a barn, soldiers at work, landscapes, war horses, and life behind the lines.

Zone 3 — The Canadian Cavalry Brigade: A Mobile Fighting Force

The Canadian Cavalry Brigade was formed in 1915. By then, the war along the Western Front had become a largely static battle of attrition — one that would last until 1918. There were few cavalry charges during the war. Barbed wire and trenches slowed any assault, while rapid-firing artillery and machine guns cut down horses and men alike. The cavalry was most effective as mounted infantry, moving rapidly from crisis to crisis, the men dismounting and fighting on foot.

Munnings began painting the Canadian Cavalry Brigade in late January 1918. For his first work close to the front lines, Munnings chose to paint Major-General J.E.B. "Galloper Jack" Seely and his famed horse, Warrior. The artist stood on wooden duckboards to avoid sinking into the mud as he completed the portrait. He stayed with the cavalry until April 1918, just as a series of German offensives threatened to shatter the Allied lines and the brigade was thrown into a series of battles.

Paintings in this zone feature Munnings's portrait of Major-General J.E.B. Seely on horseback, as well as some of Munnings's most stunning paintings of war horses on the march, at the charge, and at rest.

Zone 4 — The Canadian Forestry Corps: Supplying the War Machine

In trench warfare, which was largely static, wood was essential for everything from trench walls and structures to railway lines and underground dugouts.

The Canadian Forestry Corps was formed in 1916 to supply wood for the war. Some 22,000 soldiers served in England, Scotland and France, wielding axes and saws instead of rifles and machine guns. Canada's forestry units accounted for 70 percent of the lumber used by the Allied armies on the Western Front. Munnings painted the forestry units in France from April to June 1918.

The paintings and sketches in this zone explore the work and daily life of the Canadian Forestry Corps — including prisoners of war pressed into logging. This zone also includes several studies of horses used in this forestry work.

Zone 5 — The 1919 Exhibition: A Reputation Forged in War

In June 1918, Alfred Munnings left the Western Front. He spent the next six months in England, completing paintings of the Canadian troops.

The following year, the Royal Academy of Arts in London exhibited 355 works produced through the Canadian War Memorials Fund, including 44 paintings by Munnings. Critics and the general public praised Munnings, and the exhibition helped to build his reputation. Munnings would go on to become a respected artist, known internationally for his equine and landscape paintings.

His war art has provided a powerful visual legacy for future generations and, in later years, Munnings would say: "I have often wondered, had there been no 1914–1918 war, whether painting people on horseback would have absorbed the greater part of my efforts in the years that followed."

This zone closes the exhibition with some of Munnings's finest works, including portraits, scenes of village life, paintings of horses at work and at rest, and the large but unfinished piece, *Watering Horses Near Domart*.