

Museums and the Representation of War

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Abstract

Museums are the cathedrals of the twenty-first century, in that they have filled the void left by the conventional churches as a site in which mixed populations of different faiths or no faith at all, of different origins and beliefs, confront and meditate on sacred themes – sacrifice, death, mourning, evil, brotherhood, dignity, transcendence.¹ War not only belongs in museums; war dominates museum space in much of the public representation of history and will continue to do so.

That being so, it is the task of war museums to persuade visitors to pose the question: how can war be represented? While there is no adequate answer to this question, museum professionals must try to answer it anyway with a large dose of humility. By avoiding the didactic mode, that is, that they know the answer and will present it to the visitors, they can perform a major public service. By admitting the magnitude of the problems inherent in trying to represent war, and through it, trying to represent the pain of others, museum directors and designers fulfill a critical social task. Knowing about war is the business of an informed citizenship, and museums are those sites where moral questions are posed, questions inevitably raised about war, questions about sacrifice, suffering, brotherhood, courage, love, recovery, transcendence. Museums enable visitors to pose these enduring questions, by converting war time into museum space.

Keywords: War museums; Images of war; World War I; World War II; War objects

War Museums: semi-sacred sites

The following will begin by considering how war museums are constructed, will then turn to a survey of the constellation of war museums in various parts of the world, which have been up and running for considerable time, and finally will pose some questions about the dangers and pitfalls that lie in the path of anyone working in the museum world.

Let us begin by considering the example in New Zealand, of the Auckland War Memorial Museum. Shortly after the Armistice, the City Council took a decision to transform an already existing Municipal Museum, opened in 1856 to display the history, flora and fauna of the North Island, into a war memorial museum. It was to honor the 129,000 men who joined up in New Zealand and the 16,000 who died on active service. A design competition took place in 1920. The winners were a team of three disabled veterans who met while recuperating from their wounds in Gallipoli and northern France. As far as it is known, this is the only war museum designed and built by disabled veterans.² The museum opened in 1929, and is a thriving institution today.

It is not the image of the museum itself that is important, but a caricature which described the early days of the project (Fig 1. *Auckland Star*, 18 September 1920. p10). The title of the caricature from the *Auckland Star* is: 'Selected design for a memorial by our infant prodigy' – that is, the cartoonist, not the architects. It appeared on 18 September 1920, just before the winners were announced.

At the top left, the sketch of the disappointed architect committing suicide by jumping off the roof of a sketch of the museum, a bit of Borgesian humor or rather an anticipation of post-modernism in miniature. Below that image is the caption: 'Statue of prominent citizen to be

changed every week'. Third, smack in the middle of the building, on the lintel over the entrance, there are three crossed-out names for the proposed museum: first jettisoned is *museum*; then *memorial*; then a fragment *Mus*, before the triumphant name appears: MUSEOMEMORIAL. This bit of nonsense captured a very serious matter: what is war doing in a museum? Shouldn't war be marked in a memorial? Where does the profane stop (MUSEO) and the sacred begin (MEMORIAL)?



**SUGGESTED DESIGN FOR MEMORIAL, BY OUR
INFANT PRODIGY.**

(Submitted with no apologies to the Architects' Association.)

FIG 1. F. H. Cumberworth, published in 'Auckland Star', 18 September 1920
courtesy of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

Secondly, the cartoon addresses another headache. War museums are capital projects, and hence inevitably enter the realm of urban, regional and national politics on the one hand, and business, on the other. They are also sacred sites, and hence not quite museums in the sense of collecting and displaying interesting objects; hence the hemming and hawing about a title, which winds up as a hybrid impossibility. It is also worth mentioning that the name *war memorial museum* in Auckland is a clear precedent for the choice of the name of the Holocaust memorial museum in Washington, DC, and reflects the same mixture of the sacred and the profane in the thinking of the planners. But let us not pretend the profane is not there: notables have to be

mobilized; money has to be raised; designs chosen; contracts tendered and signed; and when (inevitably) more money is needed, public support must be rallied again. All this happened in the ten years it took to build the Auckland War Memorial Museum. When the cash ran out, a public subscription was launched to pay for the Cenotaph standing in front of the entrance.

There are further mundane and entirely profane questions which this cartoon poses. Further down, we see comments on the other two elements of building a war museum: the twin tasks of selecting and displaying representative objects and images, and the unavoidable objective of attracting the public to come into it. 'Come in and see the wild animals' is one pitch on the right, near a giraffe; 'Bugs and beetles – other entrance', is the sign over the entry. And seated, towards the bottom of the cartoon, in front of an extra large microscope, useful in searching for work, is an 'Exhausted returned soldier after fruitless search for *the war*'.

Of particular interest is the figure of the returned soldier who, presumably after viewing the museum, is prostrate from the sheer effort to find traces of *the war*, whatever that means. Here we confront a series of dilemmas about how to represent war, about what is necessary to illustrate armed conflict, and what is left out of such representations. Should it be a place soldiers approve of? What should be done if they don't approve? Do they have a veto on representations of 'their war'? Second World War veterans did just that in the United States, when in 1995, they forced the director of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington to tear up one representation of the Enola Gay, the airplane which bombed Hiroshima, and provide another. Who owns the memory of war?

In a nutshell, this one droll cartoon goes directly to the fact that war museums entail choices of *appropriate* symbols and representative objects, arrayed in such a manner as to avoid controversy especially among veterans, to hold the public's attention and to invite sufficient numbers of visitors to come so that the bills can be paid. Aesthetic choices, matters of selection, and designating pathways for visitors to trace the history of war are all part of the operation of creating a war museum. If visitors wind up, as the returned soldier in the cartoon says, incapable of finding *the war* in the museum, then it will not appeal to him and most likely will not appeal to others.

And yet, one fundamental conclusion anyone who has ever worked in a war museum knows in his entrails; it is that all war museums fail to represent 'the war', because there was then and is now no consensus as to what constituted *the war*, *wie es eigentlich gewesen war* – as it actually was. In this sense, war museums are like cloud chambers in particle physics; they represent the traces and trajectories of collisions that happened a long time ago. They never *describe* war; they only tell us about its footprints on the map of our lives.

Many of those *footprints* lead us back to the battlefields on which men fought and the cemeteries where the casualties lie. That is why they describe a kind of semi-sacred space, a memorial museum. In France, there is a project that adds a third element to the mix: the museum is called the Historial de la grande guerre, a historical, memorial museum of the Great War. This neologism suggests the field of force between history and memory, which surrounds the subject of war and the need to respect the multiple registers of emotion touched on by representations of war. War museums are about real events they can never adequately describe, not because the designers are limited, but because the subject bursts through the limits of any conventional set of parameters to control it. If a war museum shows or suggests the protean nature of war, its tendency to escape from human comprehension and human control, then it will have done well. If it acts as a site of interrogation, forcing visitors to ask the question: is it possible to represent war, it will put off some viewers, but it will capture the curiosity of others. And if a war museum acts as a kind of cultural compass, pointing to other sites and other traces of war on our landscape, then it has a chance of becoming a permanent element in the *memory boom* of our own times.

War *belongs* in a museum because they have a semi-sacred aura. They are the repositories of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and how we have come to be who and where we are. In light of the fading of the conventional churches in many parts of the world to retain its previously central place in our moral lives, where else can we find a venue for posing difficult moral questions concerning war? Museums are places where we pose questions the liturgy and the clergy no longer reach.

War museums of the two world wars

Now after considering the social and moral function of war museums, let us take a quick tour of some of them. All we need to do is to look around in order to appreciate that there were war museums well before the age of total war, but it was the 1914–18 and 1939–45 conflicts that spread them worldwide. Alongside cemeteries, war museums sprang up while the conflict was still ongoing. In 1917 an Imperial War Museum was established, settling a decade later in a home in Lambeth for the collection and preservation for posterity of the ephemera of war, ranging from weapons to correspondence. Ironically, the museum was located on the grounds of the former *Bedlam* lunatic asylum (Kavanagh 1988: 77–97; Borg 1991: 140; Ffoulkes 1939). In France, a similar wartime initiative to preserve traces of the Great War produced one of the great libraries and archives still in use today, in the University of Paris – X, Nanterre. The Australians established a *War Museum* (now the Australian War Memorial) in October 1917. Soldiers were invited to submit objects for display. Ken Inglis reports one *Digger's* reply:

The GOC recently made a request for articles to be sent to the Australian War Museum, especially those illustrating the terrible weapons that have been used against the troops in the war. Why not get all the Military Police photographed for the Museum? (Inglis 1985: 100)

It took another 25 years before the Australian War Memorial opened in the nation's capital, Canberra. Charles Bean, the official Australian war historian, had been with ANZAC troops at Gallipoli and in France. He directed the construction and design of the museum, which was the national war memorial as well. The main building was designed in the form of Hagia Sofia, and extended walls, now pointing to the Australian parliament, list all the names of the men who died in the two world wars. In the museum there are dioramas, or scale models of battlefields in Gallipoli, Palestine and Germany. These carefully constructed installations were powerful and accurate renderings of the physical landscape of battle, showing dead and wounded men on both sides.

Referring to the Auckland War Memorial Museum again, this war museum differs in one important respect from the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. The Auckland museum is the property of the Home Office, whereas the Canberra museum is run and maintained by the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs. The difference is palpable, in that the Auckland museum has a large space recounting the history of the Maori wars, whereas the Australian War Memorial has no trace whatsoever of the long campaign of racial violence against aborigines which has accompanied the whole of Australian history, since white settlement began in the eighteenth century. The Australian War Memorial is a sacred site, telling a sacred story, without the blemishes that a full account of the history of warfare in Australia would necessarily introduce. The Auckland museum is a sacred site too, but it is one that acknowledges a brutal past in explicit ways. Could this openness be both a cause and an effect of the greater degree of integration of New Zealanders of color into their society as compared to the Australian experience? It would seem so. War museums matter.

The Auckland and Canberra museums show clearly that war museums were always to some degree also war memorials, but the balance between honoring the dead and displaying objects representing war was different in every case. The private initiative of a German industrialist, Richard Franck, led to the creation of the *Kriegsbibliothek* (now the *Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte*) in Stuttgart.³ The Director of the Historical Museum in Frankfurt was responsible for yet another German collection of documentation and ephemera related to the Great War (Hoffmann 1976). The Cambridge University Library invited readers and dealers to send in for preservation printed books and pamphlets on the war; these are now held in the form of the Cambridge War Collection.⁴ Similar efforts produced a war collection in the New York Public Library. The Canadian War Museum was formally established in 1942, and houses both archives and objects related to Canada's war experience.

War museums were intended to be tributes to the men and women who endured the tests of war. They have little room for recording the history of anti-war movements, and in their presentation of weapons and battlefield scenes, they do tend to sanitize war. In the first decades after the Armistice of 1918, the fear of offending those still in mourning established codes of selection of 'appropriate' representations of war. War museums are never politically neutral.

After the war, the bellicose character of some collections was criticized powerfully by the pacifist activist Ernst Friedrich, who set up an Anti-war Museum in Berlin in 1924. Its collection of documents and gruesome photographs showed everything the official collections omitted. By displays of savage images of the brutality of men at war, Friedrich pointed out graphically the selectivity of war museums, and their unstated but powerful censorship of disturbing images of war (Friedrich 1987). It is hardly surprising that the museum was destroyed when the Nazis came to power. In 1982, Friedrich's grandson re-opened the museum in Berlin.

Second World War museums by and large followed the example of Great War museums. The note they struck was one of gratitude for the service and sacrifice of the men of all ranks who together defeated the Axis powers. There was an unstated rule of decorum in representation, ruling out ugly or shocking images; when bodies were represented, they were intact. Many place guns or airplanes at the center of their exhibition space, which remain attractive to large numbers of visitors, especially schoolchildren.

Museums of the Second World War were built in part to provide orientation to visitors to the battlefields. For example, it is possible to follow museums from London to Paris as a way of retracing the invasion of Europe on D-Day, 6 June 1944, and the subsequent liberation of Europe, leading to VE (Victory in Europe) day on 8 May 1945. Here, museums function as stations on a pilgrimage to sacred sites. In London's Imperial War Museum, part of the ground-floor permanent exhibition is known as the *Blitz experience*, opened in 1990, alongside the *Trench experience* referring to the First World War (Todman 2005: 216-17). This display ushers visitors into a dark space in which they see and hear a re-enactment of the aerial bombardment of London in 1940-41, replete with admonitions from a museum guide, with an appropriate Cockney accent, about the need to watch out for falling debris. He invites visitors to serve as volunteers to provide tea for emergency workers and displaced Londoners. A few miles away, the Imperial War Museum has preserved the underground offices used by Winston Churchill and his staff during the bombardment (Fig. 2. Churchill's underground bedroom, Cabinet War Rooms, London). Further to the east, on the river Thames, HMS Belfast is a floating museum, permanently moored, a place in which visitors can stroll around one of the warships which bombarded the Normandy coast on D-Day.



Fig. 2. Churchill's underground bedroom, Cabinet War Rooms, London. © Imperial War Museum, London

An hour north of London, pilgrims can visit two important Second World War sites. The Imperial War Museum at Duxford near Cambridge, houses many aircraft which took part in the Battle of Britain. A few miles away is the American war cemetery at Madingley, in which are buried many of the men who flew these planes and who died in the war.

A half hour's drive to the west, we can visit a museum run by a private trust at Bletchley Park. This museum recounts the successful effort there to break the German codes guarding privileged communications from Hitler to his German High Command and from commanders to their men on land, sea and air. There visitors can see the devices built to decipher the Enigma machines, encoding devices which used a system of from three to 12 rotors set randomly every day, and which were considered by the German High Command to be unbreakable at the time. British intelligence had some of the machines, and set about reversing the order of encoding, in effect taking the coded messages step by step backwards in order to find the original message in German. The key was to find the rotor settings used in each message. A team of British, Polish and American code breakers broke the code, in part through the construction of *Colossus*, one of the first computers, now in part on display in the museum. Astoundingly, Winston Churchill had Hitler's battle orders on his desk a day after they had been radioed in code to his troops, and the Nazis never knew it. The heroes in this secret war were civilians, including the great British mathematician Alan Turing, whose work helped save many lives, in particular those of seamen in the North Atlantic convoys keeping the supply lines open. Convoys knew where U-boat packs were and when and where they were going to attack. To a degree, the outcome of the Battle of the Atlantic turned on this secret war, the story of which is set out in this museum.



Fig. 3. Map Room, Southwick House. © Royal Military Police Museum, Chris Lowery.

Pilgrims can then proceed south to Southwick House, near Winchester. This was Supreme Allied Headquarters at the moment the decision to proceed with the invasion was made by General Eisenhower. The map of southern England and Normandy used at this critical juncture by the high command has been preserved and restored to the wall on which it hung at the time. (Fig. 3. Map Room, Southwick House.) In Portsmouth there is a D-Day museum, which includes the Overlord Embroidery, a direct descendant of the famous Bayeux tapestry on the other side of the English Channel. This modern-day embroidery tells the story of the Normandy landings in comic-book form.

Following the landing on the Normandy coast at D-Day is made easier for visitors by a number of museums located at key points in France. There is a Paratroopers' Museum at Sainte Mère Eglise, where the 82nd and 101st American Airborne Divisions landed on the night preceding the landing, to protect the flanks of the invaders and prevent German reinforcements from arriving on the scene. There is a museum adjacent to Utah Beach, as well as a Battle of Normandy museum in Bayeux. At Arromanches in the British sector of the landing, there is a Musée du Débarquement, showing the engineering feats surrounding the construction of 'Mulberry harbours', vast floating docks, constructed piecemeal in Britain, floated across the English Channel, and sunk in place to provide a site to offload troops and supplies from D-Day + 1 on. A second such harbor was put in place in the American sector of the beachhead, but it was destroyed in a powerful storm in mid-June 1944. Vast rusting metal structures, links in the installation that once formed this man-made harbor, still lie just on the beach and just off the coast, monuments in their own right. (Fig. 4. Arromanches coast, with remains of 'Mulberry harbours'.)



Fig. 4. Arromanches coast, with remains of 'Mulberry harbours'.

© www.panoramio.com/photo/49022263

The point of this particular trajectory is to highlight the military character of most museums and exhibitions associated with the Second World War. There are many similar museums in other countries and in other places, which highlight the story of military personnel and combat in their visual narratives of war. Herein lies an important continuity in representations of the two conflicts.

Yet it is important to note that war museums began to change in the fourth quarter of the twentieth century. They began to privilege non-combatant victims of war alongside civilian and military mobilization in the war efforts of combatant countries. Crucial to this development was the emergence of the subject of the Holocaust as a central element in the history of the Second World War.

Why the Holocaust has come to be a central theme in contemporary cultural life is a complex question, beyond the scope of this paper (Wieviorka 1998). What matters for our

subject is that, over time, it has become impossible for public exhibitions and museums on the Second World War to ignore the Holocaust. Some make passing reference to it; others redesign their space to provide visitors with images and narratives of civilian war victims, including the murdered Jews of Europe.

In 2000, the Imperial War Museum opened a permanent Holocaust exhibit on a separate level of the museum, above the floors holding its other, more military, galleries. It has a long and detailed diorama, or detailed architectural scale model, of a part of Auschwitz, including the point of entry of railway trains and the trajectory leading to one of the gas chambers. Those who want to see the war as a military encounter between armed forces can still do so on the ground floor, but they have the choice now to take an elevator to another level and another kind of war. (Fig. 5. Imperial War Museum, London, entry to Holocaust exhibition, 2009.)



Fig 5. The Holocaust Exhibition, Entry, Imperial War Museum, London
© Imperial War Museum, London

Between the older exhibits and the new one on the Holocaust, there is a floor devoted to war art. On one side is a display of art produced during and about the two world wars over the past century. Most, though not all of it, centers on the soldiers' war. Facing it in 2009 was a gallery displaying art from the museum's permanent collection entitled 'The unspeakable: The artist as witness to the Holocaust'. This braiding together of the military history of the Second World War and the history of the Holocaust is a major development in public representations of war. Following the same broadening of the reach of the museum, there is a further exhibition on a floor above the Holocaust exhibition on the theme of war, armed conflict, human rights and genocide since 1945.

Elsewhere, similar trends are in evidence. In the Mémorial de Caen, a museum of the Second World War in a city almost entirely obliterated during the Battle of Normandy in 1944, there is a section recounting the history of the Holocaust. In addition, visitors are given a *Human Rights Passport*, pointing clearly to a linkage between representations of war and the new human rights regime in Europe as a pacifist rejection of the past. In Amsterdam there is a museum at the Anne Frank house, where she and her family hid during the Second World War. The top floor is devoted to three glass display cases, in which are housed the original text of her diary. On the ground floor of the museum is a film on the theme of tolerance in contemporary Holland.

Some museums are devoted to honoring the victims of Nazi war crimes at the sites where the crimes took place. The town of Lidice was obliterated after Czech agents, parachuted into the country from their training bases in Britain, fatally wounded Reinhard Heydrich. There is a museum there recounting these events. In France, the German *Das Reich* division, veterans of war in Russia travelling north from Toulouse to take part in the defense of Normandy in 1944, herded 600 people into the church of the small French town of Oradour-sur-Glane and burnt the church down. The ruins have been left as a permanent memorial to the victims. Visitors can learn more about the story at a *Centre de la mémoire* in the rebuilt town. There are museums at the concentration camp at Dachau near Munich and at the site of the death camp at Auschwitz near Cracow.

The story of the victims of war is not restricted to the murder of the Jews of Europe. Earlier museums focused on this facet of war. The city of St Petersburg has a vast cemetery and monuments to the nearly one million men and women who died in the siege of their city from 1941 to 1943. The city of Hiroshima has a peace memorial museum that was established as early as 1955. But these sites of memory were funereal in character; what has changed in recent decades is the narratives museums of all kinds use to describe the nature of war.

Clearly, visual representations of the two world wars have evolved alongside changes in public perceptions of their character and consequences. One effect of the entry of the Holocaust into the narrative of the two world wars is the reconsideration of previously occluded facets of the First World War. An Armenian genocide museum opened in Yerevan, the capitol of Armenia in 1995. A similar museum will open in Washington D.C. in 2011. In Valence, a city in southern France where many survivors of the Armenian genocide rebuilt their lives, there is a museum recounting this crime against humanity.

By the end of the twentieth century, the shadow of the Holocaust was indirectly evident in new representations of the First World War. The Imperial War Museum opened a new exhibition space on the First World War in 2008, 90 years after the Armistice. It is entitled 'In Memoriam: Remembering the Great War'. Its design is much more international than the story told in the older Second World War galleries, and much more focused on suffering and loss. Two of Käthe Kollwitz's etchings of mothers and children are displayed there, providing a very different message than that found in the ground floor displays dealing with the 1914–18 conflict. (Fig. 6. Imperial War Museum, London, In Memoriam, 2009.)

The same somber tone marks the French museum of the First World War, *L'Historial de la grande guerre*, located in Péronne, on the river Somme, where one of the massive and inconclusive battles of the Great War was fought over six months between July and November 1916. There the horizontal axis dominates the displays, providing visitors with less of the uplift and vertical heroism of other war museums. The museum was opened in 1992, the year of the Maastricht conference, a major step towards European integration. Visitors see war – the disintegration of Europe at peace in 1914 – as the bloody history today's Europe is meant to transcend.⁵ We will return to this museum, and to its detractors, in a moment.

The effort to construct war museums describing the shattering consequences of the two world wars has left us with a wide and varied range of visual narratives. Local conditions and stories vary considerably, and in the space of this paper, we can only refer to a few examples. The *Heeresgeschichtliche Museum* in Vienna has on display the bloody tunic worn by Archduke Franz Ferdinand on the day he was assassinated in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. The car in which he sat is also there. In 2008, the same museum launched an exhibition on the bombing of the city in the Second World War, showing the heroic work of SS units in saving the lives of civilians whose homes had been destroyed.

Not far away, there is an entirely different representation of the same war. In the 1970s, a group of young Austrian medical students and doctors exposed the experiments on Jewish children conducted in the Nazi period by Dr. Heinrich Gross in the Spiegelgrund Children's Hospital in Vienna. He never went to jail, hiding behind his reputation as a scientist and his advanced age, but the victims of his crimes have their memorial. In the grounds of the hospital where these children were killed, there is a set of about 300 glass batons, three feet or so high, arrayed in a square, one for each of Gross's victims. There is luminescent material in the batons. At night they glow.⁶



Fig 6. In Memoriam, Imperial War Museum, London
© Imperial War Museum, London.

This brief survey of sites of remembrance is only a partial account of the preservation of the material culture of war. There are other sites – battlefield sites – that are halfway between cemeteries and museums. Some sections of the trench system on the Western front have been preserved. The same is true for some of the places in which decisive battles occurred during the Second World War.

These battlefield sites enlarge the catchment area of museum reference; that is, they enable (indeed they require) visitors to situate themselves geographically as well as temporally and thematically in a particular region or landscape marked by war. In addition, the location of war memorials and war cemeteries nearby can provide a third and fourth vector of remembrance to those who visit war museums.

Risks and pitfalls. Boys and their toys

Those who design and run war museums have a moral responsibility to avoid the glorification of war. This is no trivial matter, since among the millions of visitors to war museums there are many looking for the blood and guts of the victims, and the weapons that tear them apart. This kind of voyeurism is not uncommon, and may be more widespread today than ever before, due to the ubiquity of internet *war games*.

The search for war *as it really was/is* presents a second set of pitfalls, all of which have a gender component to it. Let's take as an example the criticism of a museum in which we hear an indirect statement as to what a war museum should be:

Although the Historial de la grande guerre in Peronne is the unofficially crowned kind of WW1 museums in France, it doesn't quite live up to the expectations. The location of the museum – the historic fortress in the town centre is impressive

enough, but the exhibits aren't as thrilling as you'd expect. After you've paid the exaggerated entrance fee you'll be somewhat let down with the lack of diorama and the movie feature, which audio-system doesn't quite work out (the original French audio will over stem the puny sound of the English audio-guide you're handed).

So if you're on a WW1 battlefields-coach trip heading towards Peronne, make sure you bombard the driver with enough lager cans, sharp objects and personal belongings until he steers in the direction of the *Musée vivant 1914-1918* or the Somme 1916 Trench museum, which are much better museums! Have a quick butcher's in the Historial if you've got enough time to spare.⁷

Clearly, the thrill of battle, and the sense of being there are what the anonymous writer of this message was searching for. The fact that he did not find them in the Historial is not accidental. It was precisely to fight against this kind of thinking about war that it was designed differently.

First, a horizontal axis is used as a principle of the organization of space. As far as it is known, this is not the case in any other war museum. This choice came out of an accident. The design of the museum was influenced by the great Hans Holbein painting in the Kunstmuseum in Basle, *Christ in the Tomb*. This is an entirely, relentlessly, horizontal portrait of an entirely, undeniably dead man. There are no angels or marias in attendance. This man is realistically portrayed, to the point of dislocated fingers in his crucified hands. The painting is justly celebrated as a masterpiece of the Reformation. In order to believe in the Resurrection, you need to leave your senses and your experience behind, and simply believe. Salvation is indeed by faith alone. The fact that the designers of the museum were so moved by this painting is in no sense unique or original. It was after seeing this painting that Dostoyevsky's Prince Mishkin told his friends that he saw something that almost made him lose his faith. Almost, but not quite.



Fig 7. Historial Museum of the Great War-Péronne (Somme) ©Yazid Medmoun

This presented a different angle, a different way of configuring a war museum: why not use the horizontal, the language of mourning, to displace the vertical, the language of hope, in countering the voyeuristic dangers of representing war as thrilling, life-enhancing, full of positive

meanings? Why not use the horizontal to challenge clichés about war and the tendency for those light in intelligence to get their chance to see war *as it really is*? This was implemented by digging *fosses* or rectangular dugouts about 30 centimeters in depth, and by displaying in them the objects soldiers used in their daily lives – weapons, bullets, lice powder, harmonicas, votive objects, uniforms. (Fig. 7. Historial, room 2). This stylized representation of war is deliberately remote from those displays which pretend to bring you right into the front line, as if that were even remotely possible. Contemporary film footage of the objects on display is used, but these videos add further to the puzzlement over that eternal question, how is it possible to represent war? Starker Tabak, as Kaiser Wilhelm liked to say. Too strong stuff for many conventional war lovers.

Note the pub or rugby club language too in the critique. Bombard the driver with beer cans or other objects to divert him to a *real museum*; the author of this busman's tour guide of First World War sites urges his customers that, should some spare time remained, they might indeed go to the Historial to 'have a *butcher's*', meaning in London slang, *have a quick look*, as if glancing at a butcher's hook displaying meat for purchase. Or in this case, dead men's remains. 'Have a "butcher's"' peak at war is what men do when they do not have the imagination or the courage to stare it straight in the face.

We should not at all underestimate the number of visitors to war museums who come with such expectations and such wild distortions of the *thrilling* nature of war. We should also not underestimate the way such visitors gender war from the start, and look for confirmation of their prejudices in the sites and museums they visit. If they do not find the narrative of war configured as the story of *boys and their toys*, then they are perplexed, annoyed, or disappointed.

To their credit, the designers of the Imperial War Museum have reacted indirectly to this kind of voyeuristic stupidity among its millions of visitors. Although the way in which the Imperial War Museum in London has updated its exhibition space in recent years is quite impressive, there are still two displays in its basement which cater for those looking for clichés: *the Trench experience* with a plastic rat among the model trenches; and the *Blitz experience*, with a Bobby or warden urging children to be quiet lest the Germans hear them, and with smoke rising from *bombed-out* sites.

Years of criticism have borne fruit. These exhibition halls are still there, but above them, there is a new exhibition *In Remembrance*, inaugurated in 2008. It is one the British critic of the Historial will not like one bit: it has no *thrilling* displays, and highlights both the European character of the war and its staggering human costs. It is also not accidental that this display is close to the entrance to a new display in the Imperial War Museum on the Holocaust. Nor that above the museum's excellent account of the Holocaust is a space on war and war crimes since 1945.

What the Imperial War Museum offers is a multi-vocal approach to the problem of how to represent war. As such, it deserves its pride of place as the premier war museum, reinforced by its outstanding archives including manuscripts, films, and photographs of unparalleled richness. It is a place anyone interested in contemporary history has to go. Its flexibility in changing its character leaves space for plural visions, but none goes unquestioned. The fact that it is housed in what was one of London's central lunatic asylums, Bedlam, adds another dimension of reflection, or irony, on which visitors can reflect at their leisure.

Conclusion

War museums face a stark choice: either they aim at an interrogation as to how can war be represented or they continue to deepen lies and illusions about it. The most serious pitfall in this cultural domain is what might be termed *pseudo-realism*, the false claim of those who write about war or design museums about it that they can bring the visitor into something approximating the experience of combat. All such claims are false, and sometimes dangerously so. There are many good reasons for skepticism. The first is that there has never been a single entity or events, appropriately entitled *the experience of war*; the word *experience* is best understood not as a physically embodied memory but as a set of memories drawn from a subject-position, that of a participant in war, which has myriad variations. It is not only that war itself is too protean to be reduced to clichés, but that *experience* is something we all have, and

which always changes over time. As our lives change, so do our memories, and with them our notion of what being there, what war was really like, changes too. Ernst Jünger was wrong on many things, but for our purposes the error that really matters is his essentialist position on *Kriegserlebnis*. War experience is not in your belly, unless you were wounded there; for everyone else it is in your mind and in your memories, and they never remain fixed. They are collages of retrieved and recombined traces of the past, which we put together to make sense of our lives. As our lives change, so do the stories we tell about who we are and how we got here. As Joan Scott has argued, *experience* is dynamic, and never fixed (Scott 1991: 773-97).

The lager-hurling critic of the Historial de la grande guerre is one of those who is under the delusion that you can get near to the *thrill* of battle, whatever that is, by getting near to the weaponry of war. The stuff of killing, the real core of war: these are the fantasies of stunted imaginations. It is the business of war museums to resist the temptation to appeal to this kind of stylized fascination with combat and to offer a series of alternative ways of approaching the terror of the battlefield.

One way to do so is to ensure that for every weapon on display there is an image or an object pointing to the injury or mayhem that weapon causes to the human body. All armies have had surgeons in tow, and the stuff of military medicine and the trappings of physical and psychological rehabilitation are readily available in both material and digital form. Photographs and films now open up possibilities to make weapons *real* in the sense of showing what they do to arms and legs and the rest of us.

Another way to avoid the fetishization of weapons is to change the gender balance of representations of populations at war. Women of all kinds – nurses, farmers, prostitutes, and so on – have attended war since Mother Courage's time, and their traces matter not only intrinsically but also because they increase and complicate the range of possible identifications visitors can *share* across the gender divide.

In conclusion, war museums are sites of contestation and interrogation. They can be vital and essential parts of our cultural environment if they enable visitors to ask questions about the limits of representation of violent events which cause human suffering on an unfathomable scale. And if they point elsewhere, if they lead people to link what they see in a museum with sites of memory which are all around us and which museum visitors should be invited to see. There are war memorials, battle sites, cemeteries, destroyed and reconstructed synagogues within walking distance of our meeting today. The violence of the two world wars and later conflicts produced a shower of such sites; our job as museum professionals is to map them, and thereby to show young and old alike that the colors and shapes we see in the contemporary world are shaded and shaped by the staggering consequences of war.

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Notes

- ¹ This text was originally given as a lecture at 'Does War Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions'. A joint venue of the Styrian Armoury, the Museum Academy and ICOMAM, 21st-23rd September 2011, Graz/Austria.
- ² Auckland War Memorial Museum Archives, Museum design and competition, 1920-21.
- ³ Frank, R. Eine Bitte. Mitteilungen von Ihrer Firma und Ihren Kollegen, 13 November 1915.
- ⁴ This collection is now available on microfilm from Adam Matthew Publications, Marlborough, Wiltshire.
- ⁵ For the story of the design of this museum see: Jay Winter (2006) *Remembering War: The Great War between History and Memory in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven: Yale University Press, chapter 11.
- ⁶ Thanks are due to Helmut Konrad, University of Graz, who took the author to see this memorial.

- ⁷ Historial de la Grande Guerre, Peronne, France. <http://www.warmuseums.nl/gal/141gal.htm>, accessed 20 March 2012.

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