

**Presenter: Veronica Davies**

**Object: Catalogue - War Pictures at the National Gallery (1942)**

Dr Veronica Davies examines a catalogue produced for an exhibition of war artists' work at the National Gallery in 1942

This video will help students think about how works of art are exhibited, and what a catalogue might tell us about a historical exhibition, the circumstances in which it was produced and the kind of art that was on show.

### Before watching the film

Question to ask your students before watching the film (students to complete on the attached form)

1. What do you know about the period of World War Two in Britain?

Students may well have encountered this period in other parts of the curriculum, for instance in primary school evacuee role-play, but may need some prompting to recall what they know, for example comparisons between military service and the civilian experience of the 'home front', the blitz etc.

2. What do you think would be the difficulties faced by artists employed as war artists?

There should be no shortage of suggestions, from the obvious ones of physical danger and mental health issues to artists being criticised for not being in the armed forces, getting access to places they wanted to paint, the difficulty of getting hold of artists' materials, and wartime censorship.

3. What do you think would be the difficulties in putting on an exhibition during war time?

Again, the dangers of a gallery being bombed might come to mind, and practical difficulties such as advertising the show, transport of art works, staffing, appropriate opening times given the blackout, etc.

### After watching the film

Follow up with your students after watching the film (as listed on the students' handout).

1. Debate

The War Artists' Advisory Committee was part of the wartime Ministry of Information, which, among other things, was tasked with raising public morale and providing propaganda. Are these appropriate roles for art? Should art ever be censored?

These are all issues that are just as relevant today and should provide a prompt for lively debate. Underlying them are some key ideas about the role of art, whether 'art for art's sake' or art with a social purpose/engagement. Students may well also be interested in more recent examples of this – see, for example, material on the Imperial War Museum website about the Steve McQueen installation 'Queen and Country' at the Imperial War Museum in 2007.

2. The visual analysis handout will be of use here.

Regarding question 2d, you might want to know that although the bulk of the WAAC collection went to the IWM, some works of local interest (because of the subject or the artist) were given to regional museums and galleries, which might offer an interesting follow-up. Paintings such as the two by Nash and Sutherland, considered to be of particular artistic significance – rather than just contributing to the historical record – went to the Tate Gallery.

### Online Activity:

At the time of writing, it was possible to see the documentary film mentioned in the video, *Out of Chaos*, free via the BFI website:

<http://player.bfi.org.uk/film/watch-out-of-chaos-1944/>

It includes footage of Kenneth Clark, Eric Newton, and several artists who feature in the catalogue I discuss, including Graham Sutherland, Stanley Spencer, Paul Nash and Henry Moore, among others. The first half of the film is probably most relevant to my talk, and the middle section is very instructive of how the war artists named above went about their work, which might suggest ways students could explore this in a practical way.

### Further Info:

#### Bibliography

A good and comprehensive book on World War II war artists and their work is

Foss, Brian (2007) *War Paint: Art, War, State and Identity in Britain 1939-1945* Yale University Press

which might suggest a number of related topics that could be followed up.

#### Resources online

The website of the Imperial War Museum is the main source for further information on the work of the war artists in their collection:

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/>

The National Gallery website has some interesting and well-written material on the gallery in wartime which would lend itself to further investigation:

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/history/the-gallery-in-wartime>