

Veronica Davies - Catalogue - War Pictures at the National Gallery

VERONICA DAVIS: Hello, I'm Veronica Davis, an art historian working at The Open University. I have a long-term interest in exhibitions held in Britain during World War II. The object I've chosen to talk about is a catalogue for an exhibition of war pictures held at the National Gallery in 1942.

This was one of a series of exhibitions put on at the National Gallery throughout the duration of the war. As you can see, this is a very small paper-covered catalogue, about 12 by 18 centimetres. It was produced for the trustees of the National Gallery by the Kerwin Press, a printers who are very closely associated with the art world at the time.

My copy, as you can also see, is quite battered at the edges and came from a secondhand bookshop. It probably found its way there when somebody was clearing out an older relative's attic or bookcases, and was probably bought by them as a souvenir of their visit to the exhibition in 1942.

The cover has a picture stuck to it, a strikingly coloured image by Graham Sutherland of a bombed building in Swansea, South Wales. Inside, there's an introduction by Eric Newton, a prolific writer and speaker on art at the time, followed by illustrations of some of the works in the exhibition, 25 in black and white and five in colour.

This catalogue seems tiny compared with the large, lavishly illustrated catalogues we would buy in the National Gallery bookshop today. But it reflects the fact that this was wartime, there was rationing, and paper and ink were in very short supply.

The artists who were in the exhibition were all employed by the War Artists Advisory Committee, and they would have had to put in requisitions for all their artist's supplies, and these would have been carefully scrutinised before they were issued.

However, both the National Gallery and the War Artists Advisory Committee felt that this was well worthwhile to provide a small catalogue that visitors could purchase and take home with them. One reason for this was Sir Kenneth Clark's opinion that a vital role for art in wartime was to give people something to carry around in their mind's eye. Clark was in a good position to make this happen, because he was both Director of the National Gallery and Chairman of the War Artists Advisory Committee.

Another reason was to keep the National Gallery open to visitors with something interesting to show them while the national collection of old master paintings was hidden away for safekeeping in caves in Wales.

We have evidence of the kind of cross-section of the British population who would have visited these exhibitions and bought this catalogue from a couple of interesting sources. One of them is the Mass Observation Survey, whose observers would visit exhibitions and note down the age,

gender, and apparent class of the visitors at the time they were there, and also jotted down snatches of conversations about the artworks that they overheard.

Another interesting source is a film that's sometimes been called the first art documentary, a film called *Out Of Chaos*, directed by Jill Craigie, where we see an art expert, someone like Newton, speaking to a number of visitors and explaining the artworks to them. And these include a service man in Naval uniform, and a well-dressed, middle-class lady on a day out in London.

We can see how the works in the exhibition and in the catalogue have been chosen carefully to appeal to a wide spectrum of the population and their wartime experiences if we look at this two-page spread. Kenneth Rowntree's picture of a work's canteen in the east end of London, *CEMA Canteen Concert, Isle of Dogs*, is juxtaposed with Michael Ford's painting of war weapons week in a country town.

In Rowntree's painting, workers are being entertained while they eat their lunch by performers employed by the Council for the encouragement of music and the arts, the wartime forerunner of the Arts Council. In the second a man in civilian dress and an RAF officer encourage local people to raise funds for the war effort, supported by local organisations, including a brass band, Guides and Cubs, Home Guard and civil defence.

So what we see in this small booklet is a record of an exhibition that wouldn't have been subjected to the media coverage, radio discussions, pictures in magazines that we're used to for exhibitions we see today. And it also provides a historical document, something that tells us about the visual and historical culture of the time when this exhibition was held.

And it's a period which still continues to interest and intrigue both scholars and popular culture. We could think of the recent *keep calm and carry on* phenomenon as an example of that. And just leafing through the pages, we get a feeling for what it was like for people - the people who would have visited the exhibition - to live their daily lives, whether it was as members of the armed services or as people on the homefront, in extraordinary times over 70 years ago.