

A painful vision of healing in wartime

Exhibition Rachel Campbell-Johnston

War and Medicine

Wellcome Collection, NW1

★★★★☆

Where we seek most to harm, we also need most to heal. This is the uncomfortable paradox at the heart of the Wellcome Collection's latest show. *War and Medicine* looks at the ways in which mankind's desire to help and cure must keep pace with a rapacious urge to maim and kill. So, while this show may be historically fascinating, scientifically informative and ethically challenging, don't expect it to be uplifting or — least of all — fun. This is the flipside of the army recruitment campaign.

Beginning with Florence Nightingale nursing in the middle of that military and medical disaster, the Crimea, the show leads the spectator through 150 years of conflict to end up in the black roaring belly of a modern Hercules aircraft (filmed by David Cottrell) in which doctors train, amid the oily filth, to take the wounded from the battle zones of Afghanistan.

In between we learn about anything from the initial creation of a fit fighting force through the maintenance of this human war machine by proper nutrition and sexual health campaigns to its final repair with facial reconstructions and prosthetic limbs.

The Wellcome Foundation has its own rich — and often freakish — collection of material to draw from, as well as loans from the Imperial War Museum and the Deutsches Hygiene Museum in Dresden. This is not a show of great artworks, though there are evocative canvases by war artists, a few contemporary commissions and a series

of Otto Dix prints, which take the spectator down into barbarous trenches and have a horrible haunting power.

War and Medicine is more an assemblage of memorabilia: salvaged objects ranging from ration boxes, gas masks and diaries, letters, sketchbooks and photographs to medical sketches or a liturgical kit to deliver the last rites, which together conjure the realities of a

seldom-told story.

Everywhere you turn is something to surprise (did you know that Florence Nightingale was an accomplished designer?); to intrigue (how do you roll a cigarette when you have just lost your arms); to make you peer (an entire world is captured in that one page of a diary); to smile occasionally (a malingerer's guide on how to fake anything from a hernia to a limp); but far more often to flinch. Here are images of physical maiming and psychological mangling to make even the most gung-ho pro-war propagandist feel a twinge of profound human shame.

But it is precisely where this show is most painful that it tells its story most powerfully. Look at the film of a bomb-damaged soldier having a facial prosthesis fitted. The surgeon loops the painted tin mask round his patient's ears and stands back to monitor the result. What is the soldier's response? We will never know. The patient has no face left through which he can speak.

Exhibition opens tomorrow
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Staff who carried out X-rays during the First World War had only primitive protection