



VAC Department



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"Art has a unique ability to record, commemorate and memorialize." — art critic Paul Kennedy

The power of art and the spoken word became a shared experience for four classrooms of students when they were recently invited to participate in a learning event. The tour involved two war art exhibits and an animated discussion with Veterans from the Second World War and Peacekeeping. This learning event was a joint initiative of Veterans Affairs Canada and the Confederation Centre of the Arts in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. The two war art exhibits are on display in the gallery at the Confederation Centre of the Arts: (1) Somalia Yellow, a contemporary collection depicting the 1993 peacekeeping mission, by Allan Harding-MacKay and (2) Battlelines: Canadian Artists in the Field, 1917-1919, a collection by First World War artists, on a loan from the Canadian War Museum.

On the day of the tour, students were greeted by a volunteer art educator, who set the scene for the exhibits by engaging the group in a short lesson on how to view art, how to identify specific symbolism, colour usage, perspective and gallery etiquette. The students learned that artists create different messages by using elements of visual language; line and texture, shape, form, space and colour. The use of colours such as purples, greys and browns, for example, evoke dark, ominous and sad emotions. Trees became a symbolic portrayal of survival and hope in an otherwise sombre landscape.

The first exhibit the students saw was the contemporary collection, Somalia Yellow, the work of artist Allan Harding MacKay. In 1993, MacKay travelled to East Africa as an official military artist with the Canadian contingent of the United Nations' humanitarian mission to

depict the activities of Canadian Forces participating in the mission.

Allan MacKay recorded his experience with both a video and a 35-millimetre still camera as well as the regular sketchbook and canvas of previous military artists. He then uses all of those mediums by fusing photographs, fragments of drawings, and video stills, to create a series of collages. Allan MacKay's work depicts the contrast of a military presence with everyday life in Somalia and its backdrop of intense heat, dust, desolation and violence.

The second exhibit takes the students back to the beginning of the official recording of Canadian war history through art in a collection of paintings done by First World War artists. The paintings are part of the Canadian War Museum collection and include such greats as A.Y. Jackson, Maurice Cullen, and Arthur Lismer. The oils and sketches depict the dismal reality of the times with their broad strokes and bleak colours; a portrayal of the grim reality for many veterans of the war.

At the end of the tour, the students were brought to an area of the gallery where the guest Veterans were seated. The students sat on the floor and posed their questions to the Veterans. After viewing the war exhibits, the discussion came naturally. The students were eager to hear how the Veterans' personal canvas of war experience was painted. A Second World War Veteran explained how viewing the exhibits brought back memories for him. Even though the Canadian War Museum pieces are from the First World War, the landscapes and building architecture took him back to his time in Europe. Most of the Veteran guests agreed when asked what they would paint if they were war artists: the people who are affected by war, the innocents whose landscapes become the backdrop of the visual recordings of war.

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