

# Warping Narrative: Historical Representation at the War Museum

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*Museums shape and augment the cultural memories and historical experiences of their visitors. They are institutions charged with authority and emotion, and because of this, have the power to influence the formation of national identities. This paper examines a specific type of museal institution, the war museum, to understand how historical narratives are presented and why they are especially effective institutions for provoking historical consciousness. Objects, displays, and dioramas within two example institutions (the Imperial War Museum in London and the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa) serve to represent soldiers' and civilians' wartime experiences. The Imperial War Museum has traditionally emphasized a narrative of national sacrifice rather than military glory, while the Canadian War Museum has used its galleries to create a narrative describing Canada as a distinct nation forged "in the fire of battle." However, these narratives are not immutable. Without adapting to the changing expectations of their visitors, war museums risk losing their status as 'sites of transformation' to instead become sites of stagnation.*

In the summer of 1942 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, an exhibition called “Road to Victory” showcased hundreds of photographs of rural Americans, soldiers, navy officers, and government organizations preparing for war less than 6 months after the bombing of Pearl Harbour.<sup>140</sup> Though it showed photographs of explosions from the Japanese attack, the highly censored exhibit did not show pictures of the dead and wounded. Newspapers across the country praised the exhibit to be a “morale builder” and a “supreme war contribution.”<sup>141</sup> The new Office of War Information – the propaganda wing of the American government-sponsored smaller versions of the exhibit for the remainder of the war. However, the omission of negative images from “Road to Victory” created a gap in the exhibit’s historical narrative of the war. However, for the curators and the many visitors, the construction of an authentic depiction of reality was not the point. The exhibit was naked and obvious propaganda, depicting a ‘good’ war that was free from bloodshed and the negative effects of conflict.

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<sup>140</sup> “Road to Victory,” MoMA, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3038> (accessed April 16, 2021).

<sup>141</sup> Andrew J. Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 15. doi:10.5149/9780807868218\_huebner.

War-themed exhibits such as “Road to Victory” are temporary events that serve propagandistic purposes for government agendas. They have been effective tools for rallying populations for present and future conflicts, but the fleetingness of exhibits such as these makes them unsuitable for cementing long-term national narratives. To solidify narratives of *past* conflict, and shape them to serve national purposes, permanent institutions sponsored by the government must be built. These institutions are war museums. Though the war museum’s purpose and relationship with historical representation has changed throughout the twentieth century, this type of institution has been integral in its role as a propaganda machine and as a ‘custodian of history.’<sup>142</sup> Exhibits in war museums have inspired citizens to mobilize for war while curating nation-building narratives out of past conflicts. This paper will argue that subjective historical representation in the war museum helps to create national myths through the exhibition of certain experiences. To understand the power of the war museum, we must first analyze the broader authority of museums, and why the war museum in particular is significant for the shaping of visitors’ perceptions of reality. After discussing the relationship between the war museum and representation, this paper will examine two institutions, the Imperial War Museum in London and the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, and their changing narratives throughout the twentieth century as case studies of institutional representation. These museums, one in the capital of the British Empire and the other in the capital of one of its former colonies, opened almost twenty-five years apart. Although these museums’ presentations of history were not the same and were instead influenced by their different relationships to empire, they both sculpted national narratives from stories of conflict.

Museums have the power to challenge pre-existing notions of visitors, influence historical perceptions, and create narratives through the display of objects. Curators at these museums actively participate in history by shaping, augmenting, and adding to the cultural memories and historical experiences of their visitors.<sup>143</sup> Perhaps most importantly, museums, especially those on the national level, are voices of authority that appeal to a broad audience.<sup>144</sup> With potentially millions of visitors every year, large institutions have the ability to broadcast their narratives around the globe. There are countless types of museums that draw on their authority to educate the public, conserve objects of significance, and provoke historical consciousness in visitors.<sup>145</sup> Different museums are thematically suited to telling certain stories through their exhibitions. Yet the war museum in particular is important for the creation and

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<sup>142</sup> Jennifer Wellington, *Exhibiting War: The Great War, Museums, and Memory in Britain, Canada, and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 11.  
doi:10.1017/9781316471388.

<sup>143</sup> Susan A. Crane, “Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum,” *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (1997): 47.

<sup>144</sup> Graham Black, “Museums, Memory and History,” *Cultural and Social History* 8, no. 3 (2011): 424.

<sup>145</sup> Crane, “Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum,” 45.

maintenance of national narratives. National war museums are tangible places that citizens can visit to learn about their country's role in conflict. Governments believe it is vital to control narratives of the nation at war in order to convince citizens to fight in future wars for their country, but also to instill citizens with pride and a sense of cultural unity – national war museums, as government-regulated institutions, represent the perfect opportunity to do this.<sup>146</sup> The immortalization of national narratives happens when the personal and chaotic world of a visitor's memory collides with the official and ordered world of the museum.<sup>147</sup> This collision is enhanced by the visitor's sense of 'resonance' and 'wonder' at the museum, otherwise described as awe from the display of cultural experience and the power from unique objects to evoke emotions.<sup>148</sup> Capitalizing on these feelings of resonance and wonder can help war museums inspire feelings of patriotism and gratitude in visitors, or instill in them a sense that the nation's history with conflict has been crucial for forging its identity.

It is important to make the distinction between 'war' museums and 'military' museums. Military museums do not usually create exhibits based around strong cultural narratives; instead, their purpose is to showcase the advance of weapon technology or exhibit pieces of valour disconnected from an overarching national story.<sup>149</sup> Prior to the First World War, it was these military museums that dominated the display scene of weapon and booty gained in battle.<sup>150</sup> This type of display was based upon scientific conceptions and classifications of history that blossomed during the Enlightenment, and was related to principles such as Leopold Ranke's idea to depict "how things actually were."<sup>151</sup> War museums, in contrast, rely on the connections created between events, though they are structured on factual evidence, their purpose is to stimulate emotion and provoke historical consciousness. War museums will omit certain parts of reality from display, thereby creating understandable and persuasive narratives – such as what happened with the "Road to Victory" exhibit, in order to accomplish these goals. They are therefore uniquely situated to embrace subjectivity in the museal world because of their tendencies to propagandize and tell national narratives. Subjectivity in the war museum is not necessarily a device for deception. Representations are necessary for museums to create meaning from stories and to make people care. The meanings of these stories and

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<sup>146</sup> Wellington, *Exhibiting War*, 7.

<sup>147</sup> Catherine Pearson and Suzanne Keene, *Museums in the Second World War: Curators, Culture and Change* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 168.

<sup>148</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 42.

<sup>149</sup> Stephen Jaeger, *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum: From Narrative, Memory, and Experience to Experientiality* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 32.

<sup>150</sup> Wellington, *Exhibiting War*, 2.

<sup>151</sup> Fritz Stern, *Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (London: Macmillan Education, Limited, 2015), 57.

experiences are created through the mixing of displayed objects, often by provoking resonance or wonder. Meanwhile, factual information places objects in the context of a larger cultural history.<sup>152</sup> Mixing historical research with perceptions and personal memories works to reflect a narrative of the nation's history that visitors believe has authentically occurred.<sup>153</sup> This is the important distinction between the war museum and the military museum. While the traditional military museum defines objects, the war museum represents experiences.

Ultimately, neither museums nor visitors are neutral. They must both interact with each other to create narratives out of cultural memory. The war museum draws on the 'excess of memory' of visitors, that is, the prejudices, emotional needs, and personal understandings of history that visitors possess before they enter the museum.<sup>154</sup> People search for representations that are meaningful to them. If the war museum can negotiate meaningful representations that engage people's 'excess of memory,' it can create new memories and distort old ones in order to shape a national narrative that fits with visitors' expectations and experiences. The history of representation at the Imperial War Museum in London exemplifies the changing purpose of narrative in war museums. Established in 1917 and opening one year later, the Imperial War Museum grappled with how to commemorate conflicts in the wake of the First World War while also informing the public about the nation's role in the war.<sup>155</sup> King George V proclaimed the museum's purpose was to realize the project "of erecting a memorial which speaks to the heart and to the imagination."<sup>156</sup> In other words, the new war museum was tasked with creating meaning. As discussed earlier, prior to the First World War, military museums had mainly displayed weapons to showcase the advance of technology; they were not storytellers in the way they are today. While the Imperial War Museum was not radically different from these military museums when it opened, weapons and trophies gained in battle were exhibited in the museum as relics rather than examples of technology.<sup>157</sup> For one of the first times, bureaucracies were actively managing the collection and display of trophies gained in war and displaying them as witnesses to the novel experience of the First World War.<sup>158</sup>

Because it was established *during* the conflict it was meant to commemorate, the objects collected by the Imperial War Museum for its opening held special significance. Relics from its founding collection included the usual military museum arsenal of guns and

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<sup>152</sup> Jaeger, *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum*, 34.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>154</sup> Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," 63.

<sup>155</sup> Alys Cundy, "Thresholds of Memory: Representing Function through Space and Object at the Imperial War Museum, London, 1918-2014," *Museum History Journal* 8, no. 2 (2015): 247.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Wellington, *Exhibiting War*, 4.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

badges, but it also included items donated by civilians on the home front.<sup>159</sup> The intention of the Imperial War Museum was not to collect examples of war technology for scientific purposes, but rather to display items that represented the war for soldiers, civilians, women, and children – these were objects of historical and human interest.<sup>160</sup> “All the little things which meant so much to sailor and soldier have been included,” notes one file from the museum’s archives; “the collection of trench relics... has been made with a dramatic sense of the human meaning of war.”<sup>161</sup> These objects, though not necessarily unique, were marked by the experience of war; when placed in narratives that represented individual stories of the war, they created resonance for the visitors to the new Imperial War Museum.

However, some of these objects were not even authentic artifacts. The museum displayed ship models, replica naval guns, and facsimiles of German paraphernalia. Sometimes these objects substituted the original objects when the real ones were too difficult to display because of their size, or because the objects were stored elsewhere in the world.<sup>162</sup> Despite the inauthenticity of these objects, they were valuable for the Imperial War Museum because they had the power to inspire wonder through their colossal sizes or arresting uniqueness. Most importantly, the objects recognizably *represented* the wartime experiences of people, and along with dioramas, provided alternate ways of looking at the war.<sup>163</sup>

The museum’s mission “to make it so... that every individual, man or woman, sailor, soldier, airman or civilian who contributed... may be able to find in these Galleries an example... of the sacrifice he made” meant a variety of civilian and soldier experiences were represented.<sup>164</sup> However, this allowance for a plurality of narratives can often muddle national myths, since the unified experience is sacrificed in order to tell personal stories that do not always fit with shared cultural memory. This was the case of the Imperial War Museum in the decades following the First World War. The dual purpose of the museum as a piece of propaganda meant to uplift citizens that also offered a sobering memorialization of the lives lost in battle has created a “perennial uncertainty... as to the societal function it performs.”<sup>165</sup> While war museums in former British colonies, such as in Australia and later in Canada, focused on telling the contributions of their nation to the war effort, the

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<sup>159</sup> Paul Cornish, “Sacred Relics: Objects in the Imperial War Museum 1917-39,” in *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War*, ed. Nicholas J. Saunders (New York: Routledge, 2004), 39.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>163</sup> Wellington, *Exhibiting War*, 254.

<sup>164</sup> Wellington, *Exhibiting War*, 239.

<sup>165</sup> Kasia Tomaszewicz, “We are a Social History, not a Military History Museum: Large Objects and the ‘Peopling’ of Galleries in the Imperial War Museum, London,” in *Museums, Modernity and Conflict: Museums and Collections in and of War since the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Kate Hill (New York: Routledge, 2021), 216.

Imperial War Museum aimed to include the efforts of the entire empire, although its exclusion of East Indian troops in its exhibitions of the First World War clearly showed that there were racial limits to whose experiences the Imperial War Museum wanted to represent.<sup>166</sup> The museum emphasized sacrifice instead of military glory by representing diverse perspectives such as women's experiences of war through photographs, and children's experiences through toys.<sup>167</sup> These narratives concerning the whole population were important for keeping morale high for exhausted civilians; by memorializing their costly sacrifices, institutions such as the Imperial War Museum tried to convince civilians of the tragic but heroic nature of the First World War.

Today, there are multiple museums around Britain that operate under the aegis of the Imperial War Museum. In the last decade, the main branch of the Imperial War Museum has attempted to 'people' its galleries, after the museum has been accused of catering to 'great men' who had 'great experiences'.<sup>168</sup> This demonstrates a general trend seen in the war museum world as exhibits shift away from memorialization of the dead and education on weapon technology and instead choose to emphasize the 'social history' aspect of the collections. 'Great' events that have been mythologized through the narratives and exhibits of war museums are scrutinized for their uncritical portrayals of history and the nation's relation with its constructed identity.

The Imperial War Museum is located in London, the heart of the British Empire. It therefore represents a relationship with war that is from an imperial perspective instead of from the point of view of a colony.<sup>169</sup> Its opening in the wake of the First World War represented an attempt to grapple with a seemingly unmendable rupture in history and to make sense of the incredible and unprecedented loss of life. The early Imperial War Museum sought to display the war effort from the many corners of its Empire along with the sacrifices of its everyday citizens, whereas the later Canadian War Museum in Ottawa sought to emphasize the nation's independence through war.

The Canadian War Museum did not open until 1942, partly due to conflicting ideas for what a national institution such as this should look like.<sup>170</sup> Prior to this, Canadian trophies gained in battle were collected by government archives, but were not yet placed in representational exhibits. Opening in the middle of the Second World War, the new museum sought not only to commemorate the sacrifices of Canadian citizens, but also to mythologize Canada's role in the conflict. Battles fought and won by Canadians, such as Vimy Ridge, were immortalized in museums and in national culture as instances of admirable Canadian independence, and periods of transformation during which Canada

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>167</sup> Wellington, *Exhibiting War*, 243.

<sup>168</sup> Tomaisiewicz, "We are a Social History, not a Military History Museum," 218.

<sup>169</sup> Wellington, *Exhibiting War*, 5.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 256.

became a distinct nation forged “in the fire of battle.”<sup>171</sup> Whereas Britain did not need to prove its worthiness as a nation in war, former colonies needed to create and control new national narratives in order to establish their independence from the imperial powers.

The Canadian War Museum has undergone many changes and renovations since its inauguration in the early 1940s. One message that has stayed remarkably consistent through its representation of history is its presentation of both world wars as tragic losses of life, but also as the crucible in which the Canadian national identity was forged.<sup>172</sup> Rather than reflecting on the stories and experiences of individuals, the current Canadian War Museum emphasizes narratives of nationhood and national identity shaped by war.<sup>173</sup> The theme of totalizing multiculturalism features heavily in the museum and emphasizes unity from diversity.<sup>174</sup> Photographs are shown of Indigenous veterans and Japanese-Canadian internment camp victims; yet their stories are not individualized, and are assimilated into the overarching cultural narrative of one nation and one story.<sup>175</sup> In addition, the rooms of the museum are framed as representing history as a series of lessons, moralizing scenes of destruction to warn future generations of the mistakes of the past.<sup>176</sup> In the war museum, national identities are bestowed upon citizens and made to be the most defining and important identities they have.

Of the Canadian War Museum’s 13,000 works of art, only 64 are images of the dead.<sup>177</sup> Instead, the collection contains paintings that evoke the devastation of the landscape during war, or the personal belongings of soldiers and victims.<sup>178</sup> There is a significant gap in the museum’s narrative of war, especially considering that death is arguably the most devastating consequence of conflict. It is not just the war museum’s art collection that excludes death from the historical narrative: the weapons gallery at the Canadian War Museum only lists the technical descriptions of the guns and artillery exhibited and does not display the deadly effects of those weapons. The museum fails to create a narrative in its presentation of its armaments. The museum instead focuses on the technological aspects of the weapons rather than their effects, similar to military museums from before the First World War. However, other war museums around the world, such as the German Tank Museum, have recently tried to put their weapons in context by showing

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<sup>171</sup> Tim Cook, “Battles of the Imagined Past: Canada’s Great War and Memory,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 3 (2014): 418. [muse.jhu.edu/article/554491](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/554491).

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> Jaeger, *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum*, 63.

<sup>174</sup> Katarzyna Rukszo, “Haunted Spaces, Ghostly Memories: The Canadian War Museum,” *Third Text* 22, no. 6 (2008): 750.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 751.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 749.

<sup>177</sup> Nisha Shah, “Death in the Details: Finding Dead Bodies at the Canadian War Museum,” *Organization (London, England)* 24, no. 4 (2017): 550.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

images of the victims of these weapons.<sup>179</sup> The refusal to represent a key aspect of war shows that the Canadian War Museum prioritizes a narrative of unity and national identity rather than authentic narratives of the consequences of war.

These histories of the Imperial War Museum and the Canadian War Museum represent two case studies that demonstrate how museums represent historical experiences in order to conform to national narratives and public expectations. While former colonies must prove their independence from their imperial power through the crucible of war, those same imperial powers must navigate the ‘peopling’ of its galleries by representing the diverse stories of people across the empire. War museums foster emotional connections with events, injecting meaning by creating a narrative of cultural memory. War museums are more than memorials for the dead, or displays depicting the advance of weapon technology. They are sites of transformation, working to curate national stories and incorporate the cultural identities of the visitors. Small war-themed exhibits such as “Road to Victory” have the benefit of having the defined purpose of propagandizing conflict. War museums, however, have the challenge of being permanent institutions tasked with the representation of impermanent narratives. As the expectations of visitors change, and they wish to see their experiences represented in the history of their nation, perhaps national myths that were once thought to be cemented in the historical consciousness will begin to fracture.

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<sup>179</sup> Ralf Raths, "From Technical Showroom to Full-Fledged Museum: The German Tank Museum Munster." *Museum and Society* 10, no. 3 (2012): 178.



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