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Forgotten Faces of the Great War: The Wounded Servicemen in Henry Tonks' Surgical Portraits

“In order to remember anything one has to forget;
but what is forgotten need not necessarily be lost forever.”¹

The aim of this paper is to scrutinize the unique body of work of the Great War surgeon-artist, Henry Tonks, hopefully offering a new insight into the reading of the material in question through the scope of memory studies. Examination of the milieu and the social attitudes towards facial disfigurement in Britain during and shortly after the Great War might reveal the factual importance of Tonks' artistic records, one-of-a-kind in British war art of the period, representing damage done to the human body on a scale probably never seen before, memorializing the graphic wounds of the face and a reality far different from the approved canon, both artistic and historical. With Henry Tonks' conscientious and frank depiction of the wounded, not found in the governmentally accepted war art, it seems a valuable piece of the Great War's history is now being restored to cultural memory through the reintegration into the canon of Tonks' art: a forgotten piece of a puzzle that was stored in the archives for years, patiently awaiting rediscovery.

¹ Aleida Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” in: *Media and Cultural Memory/Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), p. 106.

Due to the nature of trench warfare and the high incidence of shrapnel wounds, facial disfigurement was a common injury sustained in the Great War. And yet there was a particular withdrawal of the facial wounds from the public sphere. Tonks' series of portraits depicting soldiers with disfigurement is probably the only attempt at memorializing the damage done to the human body in British war art of the period in such a frank and objective manner, freed from the constraints imposed on the war art canon, which called for the representation of the wounded in a carefully defined way, verging on pathos or cliché, and often obscuring or consciously censoring reality. These pastel studies, kept safely in the archives of the Royal College of Surgeons, were presented to a wider audience from time to time during temporary exhibitions and were later made available on the Internet Gillies Archives in 2007, having been kept from public view for almost a hundred years. Since their rediscovery they have been an object of interest both to the public and the researchers.² While the portraits capture disfigurement in a manner presumably less accurate than photographs due to the medium used, they may nonetheless aid in representing and reading the psychological depth of the individual. Even though they appear grotesque, the faces memorialized in Tonks' art are far from surreal. They elude any attempts at confining them within a certain style or aesthetic—their complexity lies in the fact that they illustrate indescribable injuries and at the same time are the most genuine representation of Great War wounds in British war art. Tonks' uncanny studies on the delicate subject of facial disfigurement contribute to the creation of a more wholesome and complex perception of the war since they remain intense, straightforward, and unique memorials of the Great War.

During and shortly after the Great War the subject of bodily mutilation either adhered to specific means of representation or was shunned altogether in British art.³ While amputees were oftentimes subjects of fascination to the public, visible facial disfigurement was often considered socially taboo.⁴ In the end, the arduous task of recording facial wounds sustained by the British soldiers fell on the medical professionals. Due to what Suzannah Biernoff calls the attitude of “not looking,”⁵ a mindset manifesting itself quite literally in response to visible facial trauma, Henry

² Suzannah Biernoff, “The Rhetoric of Disfigurement in First World War Britain,” *Social History of Medicine*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2011), p. 667.

³ Biernoff, “The Rhetoric of Disfigurement,” pp. 666–685.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 671.

⁵ Emma Chambers, “Fragmented Identities: Reading Subjectivity in Henry Tonks' Surgical Portraits,” *Art History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2009), p. 590.

Tonks' pastel studies of wounded patients stand out remarkably from the rest of the war art. They blur the line between medical records and artistic portrayal. Whilst documentation on the nature of the wounds suffered during the Great War was well evidenced in the archives, in Britain "neither the drawings by Tonks, nor the photographs in the men's case files, found their way into anti-war publications, as happened in Germany, and they never featured in the illustrated histories of the war."⁶ As Ana Carden-Coyne⁷ writes, this removal of the disfigured face from the sight of the public became a common response to renounce and dispose of the visible trauma in order to ensure the process of reconstructing the post-war world, to which the wounded were a sorely visible obstacle threatening the regenerative process.

Aleida Assmann's observations on the nature of cultural memory, and especially the notions of canon and archive, might contribute to the attempts at reading Tonks' portraits. In her paper "Canon and Archive," she notes two distinct principles of cultural memory; the first is concerned with presenting a selection of the most valuable and representative works of art or sanctifying certain events. The second function involves documenting the past and storing the material evidence of past events which, although of no immediate use for the collective memory, still possess qualities which ensure they would not be destroyed.⁸ Unlike in France, where "the mutilated were incorporated into discourses of heroic sacrifice, leading the victory parades,"⁹ the image of the British wounded, especially those with facial disfigurement, fell into obscurity in remembrance culture since the wounded, as Jay Winter observes, "challenged contemporary understandings of memory."¹⁰ Tonks' pastel portraits were thus forgotten not only because the artist himself had certain concerns considering the public display of his pastel studies,¹¹ but also because his art was deeply problematic for the process of creating a post-World War I remembrance culture in which such representation of wounded soldiers was undesirable. This being so, Tonks' portraits transmogrified into a visible disturbance to the post-war reconstruction process; they indicated a different, more

⁶ Biernoff, "The Rhetoric of Disfigurement," p. 667.

⁷ Ana Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism, and the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁸ Aleida Assmann, "Canon and Archive," p. 101.

⁹ Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body*, p. 99.

¹⁰ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the 20th Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 60.

¹¹ Suzannah Biernoff, "Flesh Poems: Henry Tonks and the Art of Surgery," *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2010), pp. 25–47.

turbulent path of remembrance culture and would have been a disturbance in social and artistic life so they had to be excised from the public discourse. The post-war effort was focused on rebuilding, and Tonks' art, while presenting the process of reconstruction, was a troublesome reminder of what was being endured:

Images of wounded soldiers occur in the work of other artists representing the 1914–18 war, but Tonks' works are unusual in depicting soldiers with facial injuries, and in portraying the wounded using the conventions of portraiture. The appropriate way to depict British soldiers was a contested area where a precarious balance had to be struck between realism and idealization.¹²

Nevertheless, the portraits remained carefully handled and archived, awaiting their rediscovery in the, hopefully, more stable future.

While Tonks' surgical studies of the wounded faces remained in the relative peace of the medical archives, the visibility of the wounded was a constant reminder of the conflict, still present and evident long after the Great War ended. Ana Carden-Coyne highlights this observation, noting how

the wounded bodies became a site of another conflict—between memory, remembrance, healing and forgetting. Men with visible disfigurement became living monuments to the conflict. While people wanted to commemorate the war and its heroes, they also wanted to and actually removed from the collective memory the most visible proofs of the war—the often gruesomely wounded but willing to be accepted veterans.¹³

This paradoxical need is visible both in Tonks' art and in the artist himself. An interesting observation made by Suzannah Biernoff highlights how Tonks appeared particularly pleased with his surgical portraits, which he considered the pinnacle of his artistic career, and he claimed that they were “the only drawings he was ‘not ashamed of.’”¹⁴ But, at the same time, Tonks was unwilling to present his pastel portraits to a public broader than the professionally trained artists or scientists: “Despite requests from the War Office, he was reluctant to exhibit the portraits as war art, and wrote in August 1917: “The pastels that I have done are of wounded soldiers with face injuries. They are I think rather dreadful subjects for

¹² Chambers, “Fragmented Identities,” p. 598.

¹³ Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body*, p. 76.

¹⁴ Biernoff, “Flesh Poems,” p. 40.

the public view.”¹⁵ Tonks’ moral dilemma appears to be well-grounded, though. In relation to public displays in war museums and possible social response such displays could evoke, Jay Winter observes that “there are many looking for blood and guts of the victims, and the weapons that tear them apart.”¹⁶ This thrill-seeking might have led to misinterpretations of Tonks’ art. At the same time, while recording the war’s gritty realism through art, Tonks was in all probability conscious of the extreme feedback his pastel studies would provoke when presented to the general public. Tonks’ dilemma, coupled with the need to remember and the need to forget (in order to heal), finally led to the concealment of the images of maimed soldiers from public view, and they entered the quiet space of the medical archives for almost a century while post-war Britain turned to “the glorious and fantasized past [which] could be remodeled for the purpose of healing.”¹⁷

The bizarre, intriguing nature of Tonks’ portraits is probably one of the reasons why they were stored in the archives. They might have been a visible disruption to the creation of the Great War’s cultural memory canon but contemporaries nonetheless understood their potential as objects of study for further generation of surgeons, historians, and artists. In this way, they became passive memories—memories which could be stored and recovered at a later date when society was, so to speak, prepared to face them once more. They entered the dimension of what Assmann calls the archive (instead of the canon):

The canon stands for the active working memory of a society that defines and supports the cultural identity of a group. [...] [The archive] creates a meta-memory, a second-order memory that preserves what has been forgotten. The archive is a kind of “lost-and-found office” for what is no longer needed or immediately understood.¹⁸

The process of forming the canon is an arduous and rigorous task but there are also no rules on how certain memories enter the collectively recognized and commemorated past.¹⁹ In contrast to more heroic, dramatic but, at the same time, quite docile renditions of the wounded martyr image, Tonks’ portraits did not enter the main stream of the Great War artistic canon. Only Tonks’ *An Advanced Dressing Station in France* adhered to the

¹⁵ Chambers, “Fragmented Identities,” p. 602.

¹⁶ Jay Winter “Museums and the Representation of War,” *Museum and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2012), p. 159.

¹⁷ Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body*, p. 28.

¹⁸ Aleida Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” p. 106.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

recognized rules of representing the heroic wounded in war art. Thus it was publicly displayed since it possessed certain qualities showing how contemporaries wanted to be remembered in the future, for pieces which enter the canon are of significant value to the contemporaries:

Cultural memory contains a number of cultural messages that are addressed to posterity and intended for continuous repetition and re-use. To this active memory belong, among other things, works of art, which are destined to be repeatedly reread, appreciated, staged, performed, and commented.²⁰

Through this arduous selection process the durability of the chosen pieces is ensured in the active cultural memory, which is the main objective of canonization.²¹

Tonks' art, which is now reintegrated into the public discourse on the Great War and its commemoration, steadily becomes an accepted part of the war heritage, no longer shunned or sequestered in the archives. By presenting Tonks' studies of the wounded faces, a more wholesome and objective perception of the Great War is being constructed due to the fact that the time of mourning is gradually passing. Assmann observes: "Elements of the canon can also recede into the archive, while elements of the archive may be recovered and reclaimed for the canon."²² Through the recovery of materials from the archives or accidental discoveries of materials connected with the Great War, the process of constant change in cultural memory can be seen, along with its dynamics. While one might never reconstruct the past entirely as it was, so to speak, one can observe how the perception of certain events changes through the years. Tonks' portraits, once kept from the public due to the genuine threat of their being misunderstood or mistreated, are now accessible to anyone who has Internet access. These incredible renderings of the forgotten faces of the Great War confirm that "the archive is the basis of what can be said in the future about the present when it will have become the past."²³ The time nearing the celebration of the centenary of the Great War was probably when it was decided that the general public was prepared and distanced enough to rediscover not only the works of Tonks, but also the brutal but frank medical and aesthetic heritage of the war.

The uniqueness of Tonks' pastel studies may have something to do with uniqueness of the artist himself. Henry Tonks was, in fact, a trained

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

surgeon, and only later in life he became a teacher at the Slade School of Art in London and taught artists such as Augustus John, William Orpen, Stanley Spencer, David Bomberg, and Rex Whistler.²⁴ After the outbreak of the Great War, Tonks was approached by the plastic surgeon, Harold Gillies, who requested Tonks to prepare both diagrams for the operations as well as sketches of his patients before and after surgeries.²⁵ These diagrams clearly fulfill their recording purpose which was restricted to the medical field, to aid the medical staff in overseeing the healing process. In addition, they were “medical evidence to support Gillies’ account of technical advances in plastic surgery.”²⁶ While the diagrams were vital for their strictly documentary and educational function in the field of reconstructive surgery, the purpose of the pastel portraits is much more elusive. The dating of Tonks’ surgical portraits cannot be established, but Emma Chambers remarks that it is probable they were sketched during hospital rounds, being drawn from life in the wards.²⁷ She also suggests that the pastel portraits were valuable assets to the surgeons. Due to the use of color, the wounds might have appeared clearer than in black and white photographs. But, unintentionally or not, “Tonks’ choice of the pastel medium moved the drawings beyond the level of functional recording.”²⁸ Medium and mode contributed to a breaching of the existing boundaries between medical illustration and artistic depiction.

Tonks’ first profession made him especially “attuned to the physicality, the fleshliness of art.”²⁹ As a trained surgeon, Tonks understood the human body’s frailty, especially that of the face. Considering this fragility Tonks in all probability perceived human beauty as a construct that lies only in a few inches of skin tissue. Tonks’ professional dichotomy created artworks which are both artistic portraits and medical records. They impose on the viewer a particular approach, which Emma Chambers describes in vivid detail:

The first impulse is to look away quickly. However, the gaze soon returns unwillingly to the compositional focus of the portrait, the gaping wound at its centre. Slowly the viewer’s gaze shifts to the undamaged area of the sitter’s face. Now an element of emotional projection comes into play and the viewer starts to read emotions such as pain, resignation or bravery in the

²⁴ Chambers, “Fragmented Identities,” p. 581.

²⁵ Biernoff, “Flesh Poems,” p. 27.

²⁶ Chambers, “Fragmented Identities,” p. 585.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 582.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Biernoff, “Flesh Poems,” p. 28.

eyes of the sitter. However, this consideration of the face as portrait cannot be sustained, and it is impossible for the viewer to avoid looking at the wound at the centre of the image. The unusual method of viewing that these works provoke, involving a switching of vision between wound and facial features, unsettles a process of visual interpretation that is often taken for granted in looking at portraiture.³⁰

At the heart of the uniqueness of Tonks' studies lies the fact that they represent the wounded as the medical staff witnessed them in hospitals. There is no covering the gaping wounds or exposed flesh with bandages, as was the practice in more conventional pieces adhering to more acceptable heroic representation in art. In their portrayal of raw facts, Tonks' portraits are unsettling mostly because they disturb the perception that the human face is a signifier of identity, while in reality, "beneath the face we are meat."³¹

Tonks was uniquely prepared to draw Harold Gillies' patients. His perfectionism, which was bound to his medical profession, and his inner sensitivity as an artist allowed him to create portraits which are a mixture of both approaches; they capture the nature of the wounds but at the same time are not devoid of emotion, they are artistic but do not rely on specific aesthetics—it is the war's grotesque reality of mutilation influencing art, not style dictating representation. Tonks, a staunch classicist, renounced the modern modes of depiction characteristic of cubism, dada or vorticism. Nevertheless, Tonks' art displays some of the qualities of the aforementioned art movements: the faces of the wounded, although depicted as genuinely and graphically as possible, carry the qualities of impossible, often grotesque, geometries:

Tom Lubbock finds in Tonks' pastels an aesthetics of ambiguity that is distinctively, if unintentionally, modern. This is not, however, the modernist distortion or abstraction of the figural found in, say, Picasso, Otto Dix or Francis Bacon. [...] Tonks' faces are affecting precisely because they are violations of formal and symbolic logic. They combine the familiar and the alien.³²

Yet these portraits are not the outcome of artistic manifestos or personal statements; they capture the wounds left by industrialized warfare as true to reality as it was possible for the artist to memorialize on paper. When compared to Otto Dix's or George Grosz's art, Tonks' portrayal of

³⁰ Chambers, "Fragmented Identities," p. 591.

³¹ Biernoff, "The Rhetoric of Disfigurement," p. 669.

³² Biernoff, "Flesh Poems," p. 36.

the wounded is marked by lack of any exaggeration in their depiction, for Tonks believed beauty to be “somehow incidental, a side product of the pursuit of Truth; that it would be a reward unexpectedly discovered in the most unpromising material, provided that we followed certain disciplines and were faithful to our experience.”³³ This remark suggests how the former surgeon could transform the “most unpromising material”—the broken faces of the wounded—into works of art, which, although they cannot be labelled as beautiful in the most superficial and conventional sense of the word, possess an uncanny, almost unearthly aesthetic. In Tonks’ portraits, the notion of “‘beauty’ is re-defined as an intense aesthetic encounter rather than as a visible quality of beautiful objects.”³⁴ In this regard, Tonks’ art questions the boundaries of representation.

Photography was already in use for recording purposes during the Great War yet modes of representation like sketches or paintings possess qualities which the black and white photographs used for the medical records could potentially lack: “While the photographs record the horrific nature of the injuries for posterity, the pastels seem more fleeting, more time-bound. They participate in their subjects’ vulnerability and mortality rather than documenting it.”³⁵ The “healing” properties of art are enmeshed in Tonks’ studies. His approach is non-judgmental, and the wounds are depicted realistically, true to life. At the same time, they are an attempt at humanizing every broken face and, consequently, at reconstructing identity. Although on a strictly medical level their only practical application lies in the use of color and in recording the state of the patients undergoing surgical procedures, their unique intensity originates in the fact that the portraits “had the effect of reconstituting the identity of the patient.”³⁶ Before the viewers’ eyes, the human face is restored to its former appearance through the advancements made in medicine.³⁷ In this manner the viewer is able to participate actively in the “healing” process granted through art. Tonks’ pastel portraits represent regeneration of the individuals’ wounded bodies damaged by the war as well as, on a more figurative level, the promise of restoration of the post-war society. The quality of the medium used, dry pastels, further underlines the vulnerability and frailty of the human body; it is almost as easy to damage Tonks’ portraits as it is to damage human flesh. Dry pastels and the art created via their use, dusty and prone to

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁶ Chambers, “Fragmented Identities,” p. 579.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 604.

eradication, metaphorically mirrors the delicacy of human body, which, almost like the pastel portraits created from dust, could just as easily be reduced to ashes.

The notions of scientific seeing and artistic understanding are stimulatingly embedded in Tonks' art. As a surgeon, he was able to record scientific depictions of men with facial disfigurement; as an artist, he managed to capture human body's fragility. Tonks created portraits that are both paradoxically non-judgmental and that capture the essence of the patients' humanity: "Approached as portraits, the drawings imply frankness and trust: one finds a suggestion of psychological depth and intimacy that is absent from the photographs of the same patients filed with the case notes."³⁸ The portraits are complex, both in composition and reception, because one cannot judge the soldiers portrayed depending on their general appearance; their wounds often obscure any insight into their characters. The actual reception of these portraits involves a quite different mechanism than the one employed while perceiving more conventional portraiture:

Tonks' surgical portraits force the viewer to come to terms with the bodily materiality of the sitter in its most fleshly form. Here 'likeness' is pushed to its limits, the physical appearance of the face as a guarantor of the identity of the subject is disrupted as the viewer struggles to make sense of the mismatch between the ruptured exterior casing of skin revealing internal layers of flesh, and the features that remain intact. The viewer's response alternates between a horrified gaze at the areas of wounded flesh, and an attempt to locate the inner identity and personality of the sitter through reading emotions into the eyes.³⁹

Here, there is no relation between the outer and the inner qualities of the subject, for the faces on Tonks' portraits are often damaged beyond recognition. Therefore, the viewer focuses more on the emotional response. It is also possible to project oneself onto the character of the portrayed and thus recapture the emotions that presumably accompanied the subject; emotions like anxiety and pain, but also pride and optimism.

Emma Chambers notes the process of sentimentalizing both the figures of the Great War wounded and their depiction in public sphere, with

their mutilations seen as "badges of their courage, the hall-mark of their glorious service, their proof of patriotism." Popular images depicted lightly

³⁸ Biernoff, "Flesh Poems," p. 30.

³⁹ Chambers, "Fragmented Identities," p. 593.

wounded soldiers, serene in death, and often watched over by the figure of Christ. But those with personal experience of death at the Front contrasted these representations of heroic death with the ugly reality.⁴⁰

In the “patriotic and sentimentalized figure of the ‘broken soldier,’”⁴¹ wounds were often covered by bandages, or the fatal wound slowly draining the dying soldier was not visible at all. The practice in art of using bandages to obscure the visible signs of trauma and presenting the bodies as whole in representing the war-wounded, partially censored the reality of the conflict. Descriptions of the wounds are to be found in literature of the period but there were barely any depictions of them, save for the symbolical use of bandages as the signifiers of trauma and disfigurement. The nature of this representation of the Great War in culture is again noted by Ana Carden-Coyne: “Although war art and literature were interpreted as truth-telling, they were artforms—intended to dramatise, heighten, politicize and catapult direct experiences into aesthetic imagination.”⁴² While more conventional and acceptable to the public, such heroic representations of the wounded, be they through painting or sculpture, helped to create memory of the Great War which was fragmented, partially restricted, and incomplete. This common consent to represent the wounded with their bodies whole and wounds covered in bandages is noted by Carden-Coyne and Jay Winter as a tendency to sanitize both death and war⁴³ in order to either choose the appropriate, non-offending modes of representation or as a response to the post-war reconstructing effort. Through portraying the soldiers with disfigurement Tonks not only captured and recorded the effect of industrialized warfare on individuals but also memorialized the war’s after-effects on the human body and thus broke away from the appropriate way of the heroic representation. Winter observes this in his study on materials presented in war museums: “There was an unstated rule of decorum in representation, ruling out ugly or shocking images; when bodies were represented, they were intact.”⁴⁴ Tonks’ portraits, being a product of both medicine and art, “transcend a function of medical record and seem to allow the viewer an insight into the horrors of war as experienced by the individual. In this way they memorialize the war in a much more powerful way than Tonks’ official war art such as *An Advanced*

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 598.

⁴¹ Biernoff, “Flesh Poems,” p. 28.

⁴² Ana Carden-Coyne “Wounded Visionaries,” *Guardian*, Nov 13, 2008, accessed April 18, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/13/first-world-war-artists-writers-modernism>.

⁴³ Carden-Coyne “Wounded Visionaries”; Winter “Museums and the Representation of War,” p. 153.

⁴⁴ Winter “Museums and the Representation of War,” p. 154.

Dressing Station in France."⁴⁵ Tonks' portraits present every wounded man separately and thus make the memory of war more personal and exclusive to certain individuals, unlike the symbolical representation of the universal martyred hero. Tonks' nonjudgmental approach in which he presents the wounded with the uncovered signs of visible trauma is of considerable importance in memorializing the war and forcing the onlooker, not the artist, to form certain assessments about the nature of the Great War itself.

In post-war Britain, the loss of one's face often meant the annihilation of identity. Crafting a common response to the wounded was highly problematic for they generated numerous, oftentimes extreme emotional responses, ranging from pity to disgust. Suzannah Biernoff notes how in England facial disfigurement was perceived as a tragic loss unsurpassed by any other kind of wound and how its representation was avoided. She observes the phenomenon of "the culture of aversion" which stigmatized the war veterans with facial disfigurement:

This collective looking-away took multiple forms: the absence of mirrors on facial wards, the physical and psychological isolation of patients with severe facial injuries, the eventual self-censorship made possible by the development of prosthetic "masks," and an unofficial censorship of facially-disfigured veterans in the British press and propaganda.⁴⁶

Amputees were widely recognized as war heroes whilst men with facial disfigurement were often shunned, which led to their being forgotten for almost a hundred years, for "disfigurement compromised a man's sense of self and social existence. It deprived him of the 'visible proof' of his identity."⁴⁷ This notion of facelessness as a metaphorical death of one's identity was a most likely unintentional but vital factor in constructing certain attitudes towards the representation and treatment of men with visible disfigurement. When soldiers' social death did not follow their body's or identity's destruction, attitudes like looking away, avoiding eye-contact, banning mirrors, and general denial of the problem were established. This "looking away" led to a situation where stories of soldiers living with disfigurement, both as a group and individuals, were often forgotten or misrepresented. While the wounded martyr was widely recognized and commemorated, the image of an average, but also horrifically wounded soldier is only now re-entering cultural memory's canon.

⁴⁵ Chambers, "Fragmented Identities," p. 603.

⁴⁶ Biernoff, "The Rhetoric of Disfigurement," p. 668.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 671.

Unlike other war art, Tonks' portraits are "personal, verging on private, not just because of the physical and psychological exposure involved, but because of the intimate visual-tactile encounter that remains implicit, indeed embedded, in the work."⁴⁸ The destructive nature of industrialized warfare is presented in Tonks' surgical portraits in a manner less sentimentalized or emotionally involved than other more conventional pieces of British war art. Jay Winter notes that no war museum could ever represent war since they "never describe war; they only tell us about its footprints on the map of our lives."⁴⁹ In similar fashion, in these portraits one could recognize images of individual, personal lives: small pieces in a greater, historical puzzle, who became accidental "heroes" of medical archives and surgical textbooks. Emma Chambers stresses the importance of Tonks' portraits and their role in memorializing it in a more personal and frank way:

Although seen by only a limited audience at the time, the power of Tonks' surgical portraits for modern viewers lies in the way that they perform a memorial role in a much more direct way than conventional artistic memorials to the 1914–18 war, by portraying the suffering of individuals rather than symbolizing this sacrifice through the figure of an idealized universal soldier.⁵⁰

In addition to this personal experience of an individual "the visibility of the soldiers' wounds, as a result of the tradition of medical illustration in which the works were made, is also vital to the way that the works also function as a powerful memorial of war."⁵¹ Their frankness and lack of shame in displaying the soldiers' wounds creates a considerable impact on the viewer, perhaps greater than the most idealized war memorial could provide.

No matter how much Tonks was concerned with the public display of his surgical portraits, he nonetheless understood their potential impact on representing the Great War, ensuring that the memory of the wounded would not be forgotten. Tonks was not only proud of his work as an artist but also as a surgeon, who recognized the loss of the face as probably the most personal damage a soldier could suffer. He would remark "no cases of wounded in the war deserve more attention than these real heroes."⁵²

⁴⁸ Biernoff, "Flesh Poems," p. 40.

⁴⁹ Winter "Museums and the Representation of War," p. 152.

⁵⁰ Chambers, "Fragmented Identities," p. 603.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 603–604.

⁵² Chambers, "Fragmented Identities," p. 587.

Suzannah Biernoff provides a piece from Tonks' correspondence where, with dread, the surgeon-artist relates: "The wounds are horrible, and I for one will be against wars in the future, you have no right to ask men to endure such suffering. It would not matter if the wounds did well but they are practically all septic."⁵³ Yet, in another letter, Tonks notes that although "It is a chamber of horrors, [...] I am quite content to draw them [patients] as it is excellent practice."⁵⁴ In this manner, Tonks' portraits are superior to most artistic representations of the Great War for Tonks could "simultaneously view the works dispassionately within an iconography of art historical prototypes, assess the progress of his subjects as a medical professional, and recognize the personal sacrifices made by the men as soldiers."⁵⁵ Even if Tonks personally was not in favor of war, there is no trace of such judgment in the portraits. This unique quality and constant combining of the artistic portraiture and medical illustration established Tonks' studies as valuable, accurate and impressively objective representations of wounds in art. If one of the aims of the artist is to capture the fleeting moment, then it was almost Tonks' duty to capture what he saw in hospitals. And, in the end, the artist's fascination and this need to capture, memorialize and remember may be the answers to the purpose of Tonks' surgical portraits.

With the portraits frank depiction of wounds, uncovered and gaping, Tonks broke with the common demand for a stereotypical representation of the heroic victim—depicted often as being in pain but covered neatly in bandages, often in proximity of the medical staff, ensuring the subjects' promise of a quick recovery—or the martyred hero, usually dying with no visible wounds, staring in the direction of his beloved country with an angel comforting him while he draws his final breath. By employing his methodical, surgical gaze, coupled with his inner artistic empathy, Tonks managed to create a unique kind of aesthetic in the depiction of the wounded men. In his surgical portraits one finds no trace of victimization, martyrdom or beautifying—they are more of fleeting intimate memories forever immortalized in the delicate medium of pastel portraits: memories of people whose wounds moved the otherwise staunch surgeon who felt they should be recorded and immortalized. But even though Tonks' patients' suffering moved him, there is no trace of judgment in their presentation; it is not the artist who demands response from the viewer but the wounded themselves. The delicate medium of dry pastels underlines

⁵³ Biernoff, "Flesh Poems," p. 25.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵⁵ Chambers, "Fragmented Identities," p. 589.

the youthfulness of the men portrayed and the fragility of their bodies. At the same time, these portraits are proof of both human endurance and scientific development. They are artistic records of the visible expression of human resilience in the face of trauma.

While Tonks' surgical portraits raise questions concerning the ethics of displaying such intimate works in public, since, as Tonks himself feared and anticipated, they might be misinterpreted or used inappropriately, it is nevertheless significant that they finally left the archives and are once again a subject of study, for their presence allows a better insight into the more private, personal war—a struggle with its brutalizing effects endured by both the wounded and the medical staff. The wounded depicted in the portraits may be a heart-wrenching sight but, even though depression was said to be common,⁵⁶ there also existed evidence that many of the soldiers with visible disfigurement did not necessarily perceive the war as the ultimate horror, and generally succeeded in their reintegration into society.⁵⁷ “On the occasions that they did put pen to paper, men whose injuries brought them to the specialist hospital for facial reconstruction at Sidcup were apt to be stoical and good-humoured.”⁵⁸ Harold Gillies noted in his seminal work *Plastic Surgery of the Face* “the unquenchable optimism”⁵⁹ some of the most severely wounded soldiers under his care exhibited. To forget and ignore Tonks' studies, even though it was the artist's own wish, would most likely impoverish the perception of the Great War. His art possesses both a humanizing quality which could be difficult to capture by means of black and white photographs and offers the raw surgical reality. Tonks' portraits represent people on whose faces the Great War left its visible mark, thus fashioning their bodies into a living sites of memory. Memories of these men, however troubling, are more personal and genuine than the representations of the idealized heroes for they were recorded by the hand of a surgeon. Thus, Tonk's art has an even greater impact on the viewer than the most idealized depiction of the wounded martyr image could have ever achieved—it combines brutal medical objectivity with artistic sensitivity.

⁵⁶ Biernoff, “The Rhetoric of Disfigurement,” p. 673.

⁵⁷ Kerry Neale, “‘Poor Devils Without Noses and Jaws’: Facial Wounds of the Great War” (Honest History lecture, Manning Clark House, Canberra, 26 May 2014), accessed April 18, 2018, <https://honesthistory.net.au/wp/neale-kerry-facial-wounds-of-the-great-war/>, p. 11.

⁵⁸ Biernoff, “The Rhetoric of Disfigurement,” p. 670.

⁵⁹ Harold Delf Gillies, *Plastic Surgery of the Face: Based on Selected Cases of War Injuries of the Face including Burns with Original Illustrations* (London: Henry Frowde, 1920).

Marta Gorgula

Forgotten Faces of the Great War: The Wounded Servicemen in Henry Tonks' Surgical Portraits

Henry Tonks' pastel portraits of the wounded Great War servicemen have perplexed researchers for years. These stunning pieces of art made by the surgeon-gone-artist remain an example of a fascinating but shunned history of the war. Unlike other war art, usually representing the wounded covered with bandages or as stoic or martyred heroes, these portraits defy the conventional, idealized memorializing. They are uncannily raw and frank, with fleshy wounds revealed and soldiers staring blatantly, almost defiantly at the onlookers, making Tonks' portraits impossible not to be questioned beyond their medical function. They were meant to document 'before' and 'after' images of the wounded, making the artist a "historian of facial injuries"⁶⁰ and thus fulfilling a strictly medical, recording function. And yet, these portraits pose much more complex questions of ethics, aesthetics and memorializing, mostly through the 'healing' properties of art, which gave the depicted soldiers back some semblance of humanity they were stripped off so unexpectedly, losing an important part of their selves, i.e. their faces. Although focusing on unsettling subject, Tonks' portraits perform a particular memorial function since they represent a direct, almost intimate experience of war, recording a hidden history that contributes to a more coherent and fleshier understanding of World War I.

Keywords: WWI, Great War, Henry Tonks, reconstructive surgery, facial disfigurement, art and medicine, memory studies

Słowa kluczowe: WWI, Pierwsza Wojna Światowa, chirurgia rekonstrukcyjna, sztuka, studia nad pamięcią, kultura pamięci

⁶⁰ Joseph Hone, *The Life of Henry Tonks* (London: Heinemann, 1929, p. 128). Quoted in Suzannah Biernoff, "Flesh Poems: Henry Tonks and the Art of Surgery," *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2010).