Artefact Review: For What?

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After the First World War, much of Canada generally shared the desire to move forward while keeping the memory of those who fought present in the public conscience. However, many Canadians chose to go about the preservation of memory in different ways. Generally, some of the most popular artistic pieces that emerged from the war were pieces that placed a great emphasis on glory, heroism, and the idea that there had been a purposeful sacrifice made by every man who fought. Frederick Varley however, diverged from this general narrative. During the war, Varley was under the commission of the Canadian Army, who had sent him to document the war through his skills in painting and sketching.[1] Thus, Varley gained a significantly different understanding of the way the war had been fought than what civilians had grown to understand. Where most Canadians saw grandeur and a fight for liberty, Varley returned with the impression that the war had been senseless, cruel, and lacking in any real purpose that would have been worth sowing so much destruction over.[2] What resulted from his experiences were pieces of art unlike most other Canadian work emerging from the period. In his 1918 painting *For What?* Varley pushed against the mythical conception of war that Canadians on the home front had and consequently revealed how attached Canadians had become to avoiding the harsh realities of the conflict overseas.

When the First World War finally concluded, Canada erupted into celebration, one that would not come to an end until more than a decade later.[3] Canadians firmly believed that they had won the war, and in turn, freed the world and defended peace along the way.[4] These ideas are especially present in

[1] Peter Varley, *Frederick H. Varley* (Toronto, ON: Key Porter Books, 1983), 55.
[2] Peter Varley, *Frederick H. Varley,* 56.
[3] Jonathan Vance, *Death so Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1997), 12.
[4] Jonathan Vance, *Death so Noble,* 12.

post-war memorials and paintings. The phrase "*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*" was a feature carved into a number of memorials constructed after the achievement of armistice, reminding Canadians and the veterans returning home that what had taken place was not only right, but it was something there was no worth in questioning.[5] The phrase suggests that if anything, it had been the best thing to do to send their men over, despite the insurmountable casualties the war had incurred. Many of these pieces also contained biblical expressions of gratitude, with the belief that these men had fought for God, had been guided by God in combat, and died for God.[6] Numerous paintings and sculptures show angels guiding peaceful, carefully posed, and relatively uninjured looking soldiers off to what is likely heaven, as is depicted in the memorial sculpture *Angel of Victory*.[7] If their depictions were not biblical in nature then they were at the very least incredibly sanitized. Many works did make an effort to capture the actual battlefields of the war, however their depictions were usually not entirely accurate. Richard Jack's paintings were notorious for this. In his painting *The Second Battle of Ypres*, he captured a very tidy image of the war.[8] There is blood on the occasional soldier's face, but never too much. There are dead bodies, but none of them are overly contorted or too injured in a way that would make the piece disturbing. Most notably, not one man in the scene is terrified, all bearing either very stoic or calm expressions as they focus entirely on their duty to defend the line. This was the way many Canadians understood the war to be because it was what most artists were choosing to show them. Civilians had no way of knowing what the war had truly looked like on the front, and thus these were the depictions they grew to expect. The attitude that popular memorials and art developed in the Canadian psyche was that the men who died on the front did not need to be mourned so intensely, as they had died for the purposes

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[5] Alan Livingstone MacLeod, *Remembered in Bronze and Stone: Canada's Great War Memorial Statuary* (Victoria, BC: Heritage House Publishing Company Ltd, 2016), 147.
[6] Jonathan Vance, *Death so Noble,* 16.
[7] "Historic Monuments – Angel of Victory in Front of Waterfront Station," *Heritage Vancouver*, 2016, https://heritagevancouver.org/top10-watch-list/2009/6-historic-monuments-angel-of-victory/.
[8] "Richard Jack," *Rookleys: Canadian Art*, accessed March 25, 2025, https://rookleys.com/artists/87-richard-jack/.

of freedom and had peaceful deaths knowing they had done so. These attitudes were the context that caused Varley to question the nature of the war when he painted his piece *For What?*.

Unlike most artists creating pieces before and after the Armistice, Varley had seen the war firsthand. His work as a war artist for the Canadian Army had exposed him to many of the same traumas the soldiers had experienced in the front. Many of the pieces he created during his time in France captured a deep sense of foreboding and disgust, but the intensity of this mood is heightened in *For What?*.[9] In the scene, the landscape is destroyed and jagged as a result of constant shelling; a contrast to the clean flat landscape of *The Second Battle of Ypres*. A cart takes up the centre of the image and is Varley's intended focus. Though partially blanketed, the feet of bodies incoherently piled on top of each other stick out of the end of the cart as a man looks on from the background, shovel in hand. Beside him there are already numerous graves marked by white crosses and he is likely preparing to plant more as is suggested by the presence of the overfilled cart.[10] The scene that Varley creates in *For What?* is one where death is relentless and brutal. The bodies of these men are not given any special treatment that they would have been afforded at home, such as a casket or flowers. Instead, they are haphazardly crammed into the cart, waiting for a grave that lacks their name. The bodies in the cart are not the same as the carefully posed, clean, and bloodless figures that were typical of most memorial works. Instead, they are awkwardly bent and suffocating underneath each other. Distinctly, the painting lacks an angel or a saviour despite the Canadian love for such imagery. No one is there for these men other than the individual who will bury them. The piece is tied together with the title *For What?*, as Varley asks Canadians what this image could have possibly been worth.

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[9] Peter Varley, *Frederick H. Varley,* 56.
[10] Laura Brandon, "For What?, 1918," *Art Canada Institute*, accessed March 25, 2025, https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/war-art-in-canada/key-works/for-what/.

Varley's depiction of the front is considerably more accurate to the experiences of Canadian soldiers than what most other works had captured. This is where the work finds its meaning: to be true to the Canadian veteran's experience. Death hung heavy over the front, even before one set foot in No Man's Land. The trenches of the First World War are easily defined by the hopelessness they invoked. Often, they were incredibly difficult to leave due to the bombardment of shells and machine gun fire.[11] Lifting one's head above the parapet could be immediately fatal for a number of reasons, largely shelling or the presence of snipers on enemy lines who waited patiently for someone to make the mistake of looking up.[12] The trenches could cave in at any time, whether as a result of flooding or a well shot shell, leading to a highly anxious environment on the front.[13] If the landing of a gas canister was not recognized quickly enough or heard over the sound of constant explosions and gunfire, it could mean death for the entire division camped inside of the trench.[14] When men did leave the trenches, they were defenseless to the shells that rained above and the guns that were trained on them from the opposing trench.[15] With such conditions, encounters with the rapidly increasing amount of dead bodies stranded across the land were unavoidable. Many men fell victim to the effects of shell shock as a result of their experiences.[16] Although Varley does not capture these intense attacks suffered by the Canadian Expeditionary Force, what he does capture is the solemn aftermath. The war was not clean. Those who fought knew that very well. What Varley and many other soldiers witnessed while on the front was the hundreds and if not thousands of bodies that were stranded across the entirety of No Man's Land. Varley's attempt to capture even a fraction of the brutality that the Canadian Expeditionary Force

[11] Trevor Yorke and Roger Davis, *The Trench: Life and Death on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Berkshire, England: Countryside Books, 2014), 49.
[12] Trevor Yorke and Roger Davis, *The Trench*, 39.
[13] Trevor Yorke and Roger Davis, *The Trench*, 39.
[14] Trevor Yorke and Roger Davis, *The Trench*, 39.
[15] Mark Osborne Humphries, *A Weary Road: Shell Shock in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 87.
[16] Mark Osborne Humphries, *A Weary Road,* 87.

suffered every day in the Western Front serves as a sympathy to the men he watched fight. It is out of this sympathy that he asks *For What?*, hoping that this display would help Canadians come to the realization that the war was not a mechanism for glory, but an atrocity that left veterans in need of deep respect, sympathy, and support. However, this meaning was directed at an audience that had no interest in hearing it, including both civilians and veterans alike.

Despite its accuracy to the war's conditions, *For What?* was not an especially successful painting during the period in which it was created. Generally, Canadians could not contend with the image that Varley was presenting to them. Canadians sought art that commemorated the war, not art that criticized it.[17] While work of the honest sort did get its praises, it was often overwhelmingly condemned by those who clung to their ideas about the glory the war had earned for Canada.[18] They desired pieces that invoked more hopefulness and warmth, and Varley's work certainly had not aimed for that.[19] The war was unbearably terrifying, which was incredibly difficult for both veterans and civilians to confront.[20] It was far too much to handle emotionally for the families of veterans to possibly consider that scenes like what Varley had depicted were where their sons, husbands, and brothers had actually been. To imagine one's own kin as one of the bodies piled somewhat carelessly into a cart was a sharp departure from the gentle sculptures and paintings of angels carrying men away. When Varley dared to ask Canadians what the war was for, the response from critics such as the editor of *The Nation* in an article published in 1919 was to suggest that Varley was avoiding an exploration of the deeper meaning to the war, instead choosing to pass it off as aimless.[21] While some soldiers agreed with Varley's adherence to truth, the majority did not.[22] It was much harder for veterans to dwell on what had happened overseas than it was

[17] Jonathan Vance, *Death so Noble,* 203.
[18] Jonathan Vance, *Death so Noble,* 103.
[19] Jonathan Vance, *Death so Noble,* 103.
[20] Jonathan Vance, *Death so Noble,* 106.
[21] Peter Varley, *Frederick H. Varley,* 58.
[22] Jonathan Vance, *Death so Noble,* 109.

for them to subscribe to popular Canadian images filled with ease, hope, and the occasional good times they had with the friends they made.[23] Considering the overwhelming presence of shell shock in the CEF, especially closer to the end of the war, few veterans were left who wanted to reminisce over what they had been through.[24] Canadians wanted to remember the war, but not in the way that Varley was presenting it to them.[25] Instead, it was much more comforting to think that every man had been safely delivered away after his death by some greater power and that by their sacrifice a profound peace and freedom to all had been achieved.

Varley's painting *For What?* serves as a challenge to the Canadian collective conscience in the postwar world. The piece positions itself against the most popular works of the period, choosing to emphasize the war's intense brutality rather than presenting a clean and palatable image for its relatively sheltered audience. The idea that the war could have been aimless, as suggested by Varley's title, was a concept that many Canadians were not willing to consider. The disconnect that Varley created between the truth of the war and the way Canadians chose to remember it revealed the relative ignorance that Canadian civilians clung to. Canadians refused to be forced to reckon with a version of the past that did not align with the majority artistic images they had been presented with at the war's end. Thus, the meaning attached to *For What?* was rejected, with many Canadians maintaining a general sense of national pride and a well-earned victory against evil in their collective memory of the war.

[23] Jonathan Vance, *Death so Noble,* 109.
[24] Mark Osbourne Humphries, A Weary road, 89.
[25] Jonathan Vance, *Death so Noble,* 110.

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