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## ARTISTS IN UNIFORM:

(Written for "The Listener" by "463122")

IF you find it difficult to believe that war has its wonders, no less renowned than those of peace, go and see the A.E.W.S. art exhibition when it comes your way. Because this show is, in its own way, one of the wonders of the war for us in New Zealand, and at the same time one of the most significant achievements of the A.E.W.S.

If that sounds like hyperbole, remember first of all that from blue-print to production line, the exhibition has not been ten months in the making. In that short time nearly 600 pictures from camps all over New Zealand, the South Pacific, and the Middle East, have been sent into A.E.W.S. headquarters in Wellington. With some exceptions, too, they are not the work of professional artists, or even of hardened amateurs. The civilian become soldier has, by an even more remarkable metamorphosis, become artist.

And it is a remarkable metamorphosis. Yesterday New Zealand was a land without art or culture (so we were told). To-day a hundred or two men and women of the Services, working under all sorts of handicaps of time and place, have disproved that statement finally and irrevocably.

### Light in the Desert

When I was invited along to a preview of the exhibits in Wellington last week, hanging was still in progress, and though the exhibition catalogue had gone to the printers, canvases were still coming in. Among these post-entries is a group of water-colours, painted in the Western Desert and in Lebanon by a young soldier called Robin Kay, who has every right to the title of artist. Twelve of his paintings have been grouped together and, though I cannot claim to speak as one having authority, I do know what I like and, after all, I have at least been a "model in uniform" if not an artist. So I would unhesitatingly class Kay's water-colours as the highlight of the show. Light is, in fact, their most striking characteristic, for the artist has captured that crisp clarity so typical of the desert atmosphere in early spring, when the eye seems to leap effortlessly to horizons infinitely far away. There are no guns, no tanks, in Robin Kay's desert. Only in one canvas is there any suggestion of the wreckage and the flotsam of war, but in the curve of his hand he has captured the wild, lonely beauty of wadi and escarpment and the eternal testimony of the rocks.

### Low Life

Like Robin Kay, most of the other contributors to the show are artists in uniform rather than war artists. In general, the war is incidental as far as their pictures go. Training camp, for example, is represented not by an impressionistic sketch of a battalion parade or a march past, but by "The Ablutionists" and "Tempus Fugit," two rich samples of low life which will draw reminiscent chuckles from anyone who has been through the mill as a rookie.

The former portrays, with a Hogarthian wealth of detail, the melee which occurs in any camp ablution-shed about 0730 hours, when everyone is trying to wash and shave simultaneously, and

there are never enough basins or taps to go round. "Tempus Fugit," an equally fine piece of frenzy, portrays the last hectic moments of I.E. (hut cleaning to you civilians!) before company parade at 0800 hours. For these choice samples of emotion recollected in tranquillity, we are indebted to Pte. C. T. Laugeson; and for another genre water-colour in similar vein, this time depicting a gargle of WAACS, to Bdr. E. F. Christie, one of the *Maedchen in Uniform*.

Service readers will already have seen Bdr. Christie's picture reproduced in *Korero*, the A.E.W.S. background bulletin, but make it a "must" if you have the chance to get to the exhibition. In fact, every picture in the show should be a "must." They are not all good pictures, in the art society sense. In some the draughtsmanship is laboured, but every artist, however primitive, has had something to say, and has managed to say it.

### Variety of Styles

Though most of the work must have been done by men and women free from the restraints of the schools, academic or impressionistic, I found it interesting to notice the variety in styles. "Te Wao Nui-a-Tane," for example, a splendid black-and-white by Sgt. H. D. Dansey, reminded me forcibly of the work of Trevor Lloyd. Cpl. M. Jillett's water-colours from the Near North have some of the luminosity which is to be found in the canvases of Lamorna Birch, and I was greatly impressed by his "Melanesian Cathedral," where he has used colour with a masterly hand.

Among the impressionists, Sgt. A. N. Goldwater ranks high with his "Natives Dancing," a tiny primitive pen-and-ink sketch which betrays a strength and insight almost Gauguinesque, and "Wharfside Scene" by John Holmwood, with its bright colours and air of important busyness seemed to me reminiscent of Firth, the Victorian.

### A Familiar Note

One or two pictures, a pencil drawing and a water-colour showing a maintenance crew at work on a tank, reminded me strongly of Russell Clark's work. Then I noticed that they were entered by "2/Lt. R.C." *Listener* readers should make a point of seeing these exhibits, of which I thought "Conversation Piece," a pencil study, the most charming.

Russell Clark is one of the comparatively few exhibitors in the professional class, but there are quite a number of familiar names to be found in the catalogue. Sgt. A. S. Paterson is represented by at least one black-and-white sketch, Gordon McIntyre has contributed a number of cartoons in colour, and Cpl. R. M. Conly, of Rotorua, designer of many splendid covers for *Contact*, the R.N.Z.A.F. magazine, is exhibiting a number of these covers, as well as some excellent crayon portraits of Air Force notabilities.

The entire exhibition is a complete vindication of its sponsors' faith in the ability of even "poor country lads" to rise above the level of the functional and the utilitarian. For myself, I came away cheered by the thought that so many ordinary men and women could so observingly distil the soul of goodness from these evil times.