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## Two Wars Enclosed Him

### Paul Nash Stands High Among English Painters

PAUL NASH, one of Britain's best-known artists, died last month. The tribute to him which we reprint below was paid by the critic Eric Newton in a BBC Pacific Service talk re-broadcast the other evening by 2YA.

WHEN Paul Nash died three weeks ago at the age of 57 England lost one of her greatest artists. I could easily have said her greatest artist, but it is for posterity to make judgments of that kind. During a man's lifetime no one can possibly estimate the exact importance of his contribution and immediately after his death it is still more difficult, especially if one not only admired him as an artist, but also knew him as a man. But perhaps I am taking too much for granted in assuming that you who are listening to me on the other side of the world have even heard of him. There are plenty of great artists who are known only to their own countrymen and to a handful of enthusiasts scattered up and down the world who make it their business to find out what's happening in their own particular sphere. Of course there are artists whose names are household words wherever one goes—Epstein for example. But that's not so much because they are great men, though they certainly are, as because their work is sensational and always arouses violent controversy. Paul Nash was never a sensational artist. He worked steadily, he worked quietly, he aroused no passions, he was not even a revolutionary. His admirers were many, but he was never a popular painter. For that very reason I feel sure that his reputation will increase rather than diminish as time goes on. For the artist who depends on an appeal to fashionable taste must inevitably lose his appeal when fashion changes. But before I describe his work, before I try to explain just what he did achieve during the 30-odd years of his active career as a painter, let me give you one or two biographical details.

#### War Artist in 1917

He was born in London in 1889, and educated at a public school. He was destined for the Navy, but luckily never arrived at that destination. He began to study art at the Chelsea Polytechnic and later went to the Slade School. In 1913 he held a small joint exhibition of landscape drawings and water colours in London with his artist brother, John Nash. The critics liked it, but it attracted little public attention. Then came the war of 1914-1918. He enlisted in the Artists' Rifles, and later obtained a commission in the Hampshire Regiment, saw active service in France, accidentally broke a rib, and was invalided home. During his convalescence he exhibited a series of drawings he had made in the trenches, and as a result of the interest aroused by them, he was appointed Official War Artist on the Western Front by the Foreign Office. Only one month—the month of October, 1917—was

spent in making these official records, but that month was the turning point in his career. The exhibition of his war pictures held at the Leicester Galleries proved that he had genius. That was recognised at once. He was commissioned to paint a huge picture of the Western Front for the Imperial War Museum. After the war he divided his time between painting, designing for the theatre, designing textiles, and doing book illustrations in woodcut. Then bad health compelled him to travel to the South of France. But his roots were in England and his work is always a reflection or an interpretation of England. He held a series of one-man exhibitions in London in 1924, 1925, 1927, and 1928.

#### Aeroplanes Fascinated Him

In 1933 he was a moving spirit in forming a group of the most experimental artists and architects among his contemporaries. Its name was Unit I. It was short-lived, but it marked him out as a leader—a leader in his own generation—and as a rebel against the academic spirit in art. Painting absorbed him. His work became more and more assured and more and more personal.

The war of 1939-1945 found him ready to play his part again as an official war artist. This time it was not the trenches, not the shell-torn surface of the land that interested him, but the more dynamic struggle in the air. Aeroplanes, shattered and maimed in battle or alert and purposeful in action. Aeroplanes fascinated him and he managed to interpret in his art an aspect of modern warfare that one would have thought was quite beyond the scope of the painter. He had just left the war behind him and he was just resuming his old intimate contact with the English countryside when he died on July 12.

Those are the bare facts. They suggest an uneventful, even a monotonous life, but superficial monotony is always a mark of a steady, purposeful man who knows what he wants and refuses to pursue will-o'-the-wisps. Nash never suffered either from the struggle that comes from neglect or from the pride that comes from a too-easy success. What he achieved was on the whole achieved under enviable conditions. What then did he achieve? What is it that makes his work important, not merely among his contemporaries but also as a landmark in the history of British art? That is never an easy question to answer to an audience, especially to one which may not be acquainted with the artist's work.

#### Elusive Quality

If you have never seen a drawing by Blake, or a picture by Turner it would be difficult to describe in words just (continued on next page)



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