

David Cotterrell: bbc.co.uk : The uneasy link between war and medicine

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Two works of art, two stories. Each portray the stark realities of war in their time, and show how medicine has struggled over the years to heal the injured.

In one corner of the Wellcome Collection, a huge canvas depicts a World War I soldier "being heaved out of the mud" on a stretcher, as curator Kate Forde puts it.

In another, a 360 degree video installation shows medical staff caring for wounded soldiers in Afghanistan with all that modern medicine has to offer.

Kate Forde says the oil painting, by Gilbert Rogers, is "quite horrifically realistic".

"It was painted after the war, but no doubt he was making preparatory sketches while at the front," she explains.

The canvas remained rolled up in the Wellcome Collection's vast stores for half a century, and was flaking and cracked when it was unpacked, she says. It required several weeks of restoration before going on display to the public.

In contrast, the high-tech video installation, by David Cotterrell, was commissioned for the exhibition to show the modern face of war medicine.

The artist spent several weeks in Afghanistan in 2007, witnessing operations in field tents in the desert, and soldiers being flown home for emergency surgery.

Other displays include the plastic surgery techniques first developed during World War I to treat disfiguring facial wounds, through to video stories of the mental scars left by war.

Kate Forde says she hopes visitors will think about "the contradiction between the destruction of war and the humanity of healing".

It's a subject "not taboo but slightly concealed", she says. "People will think about the human cost of war, not just the physical impact."

Helen Briggs

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