

# MUNNINGS

## THE WAR YEARS



SEPTEMBER 18 —  
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*A travelling exhibition developed  
by the Canadian War Museum, in  
partnership with the Munnings Art  
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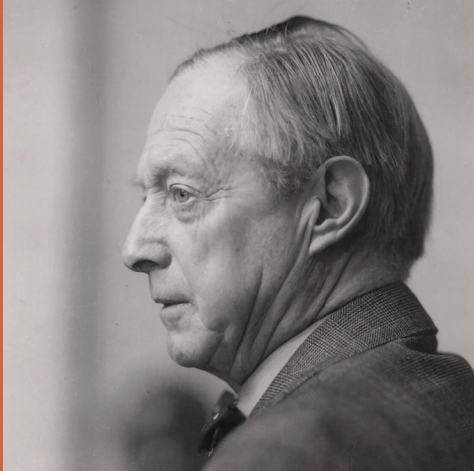
TRAVELLING EXHIBITION  
EXPOSITION ITINÉRANTE



CANADIAN  
WAR  
MUSEUM  
-  
MUSÉE  
CANADIEN  
DE LA GUERRE



# ALFRED MUNNINGS (1878-1959)



## NOTICE, WONDER, UNCOVER!

After losing sight in one eye, Munnings learned to see in a new way. This exhibition invites you to do the same, looking beyond the surface to uncover the resilience, care, and complexity of Canada's wartime efforts.

What painting or artifact do you connect to the most and why?

From a young age, Alfred Munnings was captivated by painting, particularly scenes of country life and horses. In his early years, he created artworks that depicted rural people, hunting scenes, and rural landscapes. In 1899, a freak accident nearly ended his career as an artist.<sup>1</sup> While helping a puppy, a thorn pierced his eye, resulting in irreversible damage. Munnings later recounted, "Soon I knew the worst... I saw nothing but grey fog."<sup>2</sup> Despite undergoing surgery, he lost sight in his right eye. Reflecting on this period in his life, Munnings remarked, "I wasn't allowed to use my remaining eye for months; when I began to do so, I could not judge distances."<sup>3</sup>

In 1914, Munnings was eager to join the war; however, because of his injury, he was rejected from military service. Although seen as unfit for duty, Munnings did not give up. On a second attempt to enlist, he inquired whether he could serve by tending to the horses. "I asked the doctor in uniform if I couldn't be a farrier. His reply was that they could not teach artists to be farriers."<sup>4</sup> Before the Canadian War Memorials Fund commissioned him, Munnings worked at a Remount Depot in England, caring for horses and prepping them for the front lines.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, Munnings was selected to go to France to paint Canadian War Records.<sup>6</sup> Munnings was assigned to the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, where he noted, "Day after day, with all the models I needed, what a chance for an artist!"<sup>7</sup> During his time on the front lines, Munnings also captured the work of the Canadian Forestry Corps by painting scenes of felling teams, sawmills, and German prisoners of war. These works not only earned him acclaim after the war but also created a visual legacy of Canada's contributions to World War I.

## LORD STRATHCONAS HORSE (ROYAL CANADIANS)

Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) (LdSH(RC)) was established in 1900 through the efforts of Lord Strathcona, who personally funded the creation of a mounted regiment for the South African War.<sup>8</sup> Composed initially of skilled riders from the Canadian West, the regiment gained a reputation for its exceptional horsemanship and unwavering loyalty. By 1910, it was formalized into Canada's Permanent Force, and in 1914, it mobilized for World War I.<sup>9</sup> From May 1915 to the end of 1917, the LdSH(RC) rotated through front line service participating in various engagements despite high casualty rates. Throughout the war, they continued to serve through several key battles, making significant contributions to the Allied victory and demonstrating extraordinary grit and resilience. Their efforts in World War I solidified their reputation as one of Canada's most celebrated and storied cavalry regiments.

## THE CANADIAN CAVALRY BRIGADE

The Canadian Cavalry Brigade affirmed Canada's commitment to mounted regiments during World War I, even as trench warfare was changing military strategies. The Brigade consisted of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, LdSH(RC), Fort Garry Horse, and other supporting units, including the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery and the 2nd King Edward's Horse. They trained in England and were deployed to France in 1915.<sup>10</sup> In March 1918, the Brigade executed one of the last successful cavalry charges at the Battle of Moreuil Wood, followed by another intense encounter at Rifle Wood.<sup>11</sup> Their operations received widespread praise for their discipline, mobility, and morale.

## THE CANADIAN FORESTRY CORPS

The Canadian Forestry Corps was established during World War I to meet the urgent need for timber, which was essential for building infrastructure, including trenches and roads.<sup>12</sup> By 1916, the British Army sought Canada's expertise in logging, resulting in over 22,000 Canadians serving in the Corps.<sup>13</sup> The Corps built sawmills, felled trees, and transported lumber to the front lines. Among those who served were black, indigenous and other men who were excluded from combat roles, including those deemed physically unfit.<sup>14</sup> Alfred Munnings painted scenes of their daily labour, highlighting a form of heroism rooted in endurance and skill.<sup>15</sup> The Canadian Forestry Corps played a vital role in supporting the Allied war effort.

# THE ARTIST

At the age of 14, Alfred Munnings began a six-year apprenticeship at a lithographer's studio in Norwich.<sup>16</sup> During these six years, he also attended evening art classes, drawing from still life and learning watercolour painting techniques.<sup>17</sup> He often depicted horses trotting through pastures, captured the energy of county fairs, and conveyed the rhythm of agricultural life.

This early connection to horses, as subjects and companions, stayed with him throughout his life. In *Halt on the March by a Stream at Nesle* (1918), Munnings uses lush colours and loose brushwork to depict a moment of rare calm, where soldiers and horses find relief in a part of the countryside that had not yet been affected by the conflict.

*Le Comte d'Etchegoyen* (1918) showcases another aspect of Munnings' practice: formal portraiture. Renowned for his ability to portray the characteristics of different horse breeds, in this piece, he captures the dignity and complexity of the Comte and his mount, seemingly pausing for a second. From a boy who loved to draw, Munnings grew into a great artist who painted horses and soldiers on the battlefield.



*Le Comte D'Etchegoyen*,  
Alfred Munnings, 1918.  
Beaverbrook Collection of War Art  
Canadian War Museum  
19710261-0454



## PAUSE, OBSERVE, REFLECT!

*Halt on the March by a Stream at Nesle* (1918)

Dive into the stillness of war through Visual Arts and ELA with online worksheets and lesson plans that guide your critical and creative thinking.

# FORGING A VISUAL LEGACY

*"To describe the heartiness and enthusiasm of a true-born Canadian is not easy"*

During the First World War, Canadian press baron Sir Max Aitken, who later became known as Lord Beaverbrook, recognized the power of art in shaping national memory.<sup>18</sup> In 1916, he established the Canadian War Memorials Fund to commission 100 Canadian and British artists to document Canada's wartime contributions, including Alfred Munnings.<sup>19</sup> Munnings' sensitive depictions of cavalry soldiers, horses, and wartime scenes provided an alternative to the chaos typically depicted and associated with war.<sup>20</sup>

In works like *A Canadian Trooper and His Horse (Unfinished)* (1918) and *Log Loading* (1918), Munnings portrayed soldiers with dignity. His impressionistic brushwork and attention to detail evoke a sense of calm amid wartime rigour and routine. These paintings romanticize military service while subtly constructing a national identity rooted in resilience and strength. Even in its unfinished state, *A Canadian Trooper and His Horse (Unfinished)* (1918) reveals the humanity and dignity of his subjects. Munnings' art, created during his time on the front line with the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and with the Canadian Forestry Corps, presents a noble vision of war, one that continues to influence how Canada remembers its role in World War I.



*A Canadian Trooper and his Horse (Unfinished)*,  
Alfred Munnings, 1918.  
Beaverbrook Collection of War Art  
Canadian War Museum  
19710261-0460



## PAUSE, OBSERVE, REFLECT!

Be inspired by *A Canadian Trooper and his Horse (Unfinished)* (1918) and then paint fleeting movement through a Visual Art unit focused on storytelling, brushwork, and emotion.



# DEVASTATION AND BEAUTY

When Alfred Munnings arrived at the Western Front in January 1918, the front lines were marked by destruction, leaving a significant scar across Belgium and France.<sup>21</sup> In his paintings, such as *Brigade Headquarters at Smallfoot Wood* (1918), Munnings captured the scorched trees, duckboards, and dugouts that replaced what was once a living, thriving forest.

Contrasting this devastation, he also painted scenes of surprising calm just a few kilometers behind the trenches, such as *A Stream Bed at Labergement* (1918), where the countryside remained largely untouched. In this space between destruction and tranquility, Munnings produced some of his most emotionally resonant work. While he avoided direct depictions of death, the effects of war, both on the land and the emotional toll on those affected, are evident throughout his paintings.<sup>22</sup>

Horses, central to Munnings' life and artistic practice, were also vital to the Canadian war effort. The Canadian Expeditionary Force deployed over 23,500 horses to support transport, artillery, and cavalry operations.<sup>23</sup> In works like *A Grey Team, Forest of Dreux* (1918), Munnings portrayed the daily work and emotional connection between horses and soldiers. On display in a nearby case are artifacts including bits, long-shank spurs, and riding gloves. These tools were essential for the care and control of horses on the Western Front. Far from the battlefield, these tools represent the daily labour required to guide, maintain, and protect these vital companions during the war.



## RESEARCH, REFLECT, REVEAL!

Connecting to themes of nationalism and Social Studies, explore the forces behind the front lines. In this section, analyze how Munnings' artwork reveals the critical roles Canadians played in cavalry, forestry, and supply efforts.

*Fatigue Party making Bomb-proof Shelters in Smallfoot Wood,*  
Alfred Munnings 1918.  
Beaverbrook Collection of War Art Canadian War Museum  
19710261-0449







*Charge of Flowerdew's Squadron,*  
Alfred Munnings 1918.  
Beaverbrook Collection of War Art Canadian War Museum  
19710261-0443

## A MOBILE FIGHTING FORCE

Alfred Munnings joined the Canadian Cavalry Brigade in 1918.<sup>24</sup> From January to April, he traveled with the brigade and painted the portrait of Major-General the Right Honourable J. E. B. Seely, the brigade's commander, with his horse, Warrior.<sup>25</sup>

Munnings' only battle painting, *Charge of Flowerdew's Squadron* (1918), commemorates the fateful cavalry assault at Moreuil Wood.<sup>26</sup> Although he did not witness the charge firsthand, Munnings painted it as a tribute to Lieutenant Gordon Flowerdew, who led his squadron into machine-gun fire. This poignant painting captures the drama and sacrifice of one of the last cavalry charges in military history.

Lieutenant Gordon Flowerdew was fatally wounded in action and posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. The official citation reads: "Lieutenant Flowerdew was dangerously wounded through both thighs during the operation but continued to cheer on his men. There can be no doubt that this officer's great valour was the prime factor in the capturing of the position."<sup>27</sup>

Highlighted among those who participated in that infamous charge are Private John James Willoughby and Lance Corporal Vaillancourt. Willoughby was killed in action at Moreuil Wood. Lance Corporal Vaillancourt was a farrier responsible for trimming, shoeing, and caring for the horses' hooves.<sup>28</sup> The life expectancy of a horse at the front line could be as short as six days. Farriers like Vaillancourt worked to keep the animals healthy and mobile under extreme conditions.<sup>29</sup>



### INVESTIGATE, ANALYZE, REMEMBER!

Through ELA and Social Studies, explore how Munnings' images and wartime artifacts shape Canadian hero myths. Through the artifacts of Vaillancourt and Willoughby, discover the human and equine experiences behind the front lines.

# SUPPLYING THE WAR MACHINE

During the static trench warfare of World War I, wood became a strategic resource. It was essential for building dugouts, lining trenches, laying railways, and constructing shelters and pathways across No Man's Land.<sup>30</sup> To meet the demand for timber, the Canadian Forestry Corps was formed in 1916. More than 22,000 soldiers, many of whom were former loggers, were deployed to forests in France, Scotland, and England to harvest and process wood.<sup>31</sup>

From April to June 1918, Munnings was embedded with these forestry units in Normandy and the Jura region. His vivid paintings, such as *Felling a Tree in the Vosges* (1918), *A Team Log-Skidding in the Forest* (1918), and *Camp at Malbuisson near Pontarlier* (1918), capture the spirit of the men, along with their animals, supporting the war effort. In *An April Day in the Forest* (1918), a lone sentry rests on a massive, felled oak, symbolizing both the scale of nature and the efforts of the Forestry Corps.

Artifacts on display further illuminate this story. Tools for horse care, a veterinary kit, and a fully outfitted taxidermy horse showcase the crucial role of equine power. A single horse could carry heavy loads of gear, including a rider, saddle, bridle, rifle, rations, and packs. When wet, this load became even heavier, placing significant strain on both the animal and the soldier. The work of the Canadian Forestry Corps highlights a lesser-known chapter of the Great War, one in which endurance, logistics, and teamwork in the forests were just as crucial as any battle on the war's front lines.



## LOOK, LISTEN, LEARN!

Explore the contributions of the Canadian Forestry Corps in World War I through Social Studies and ELA. Using paintings like *An April Day in the Forest* (1918) as inspiration, craft a response that gives voice to the soldiers, animals, and landscapes that supported Canada's war effort beyond the battlefield.

*An April Day in the Forest*,  
Alfred Munnings 1918.  
Beaverbrook Collection of War Art Canadian War Museum  
19710261-0470







*Horses and Chargers of Various Units*,  
Alfred Munnings 1918.  
Beaverbrook Collection of War Art Canadian War Museum  
19710261-0448

## A REPUTATION FORGED IN WAR

Alfred Munnings left the Western Front in June 1918 and spent the following months in England creating paintings based on his wartime sketches.<sup>32</sup> In early 1919, 45 of his works were showcased in a major exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, organized as part of the Canadian War Memorials Fund.<sup>33</sup> The exhibition was a success, earning Munnings critical acclaim and establishing his reputation. Shortly after the exhibition, Munnings was made an associate member of the Royal Academy.<sup>34</sup> His respectful portrayals of soldiers and their horses resonated deeply with the public, shaping his future career as a leading equestrian painter and ultimately leading to his election as president of the Royal Academy in 1944.<sup>35</sup>

In *Watering Horses of the Black and Brown Troop* (1918), Munnings employs a more subdued colour palette, creating a sombre atmosphere that reflects the quiet hardships experienced during the war. In contrast, *Horses and Chargers of Various Units* (1918) conveys warmth and energy, suggesting the troops' high spirits.

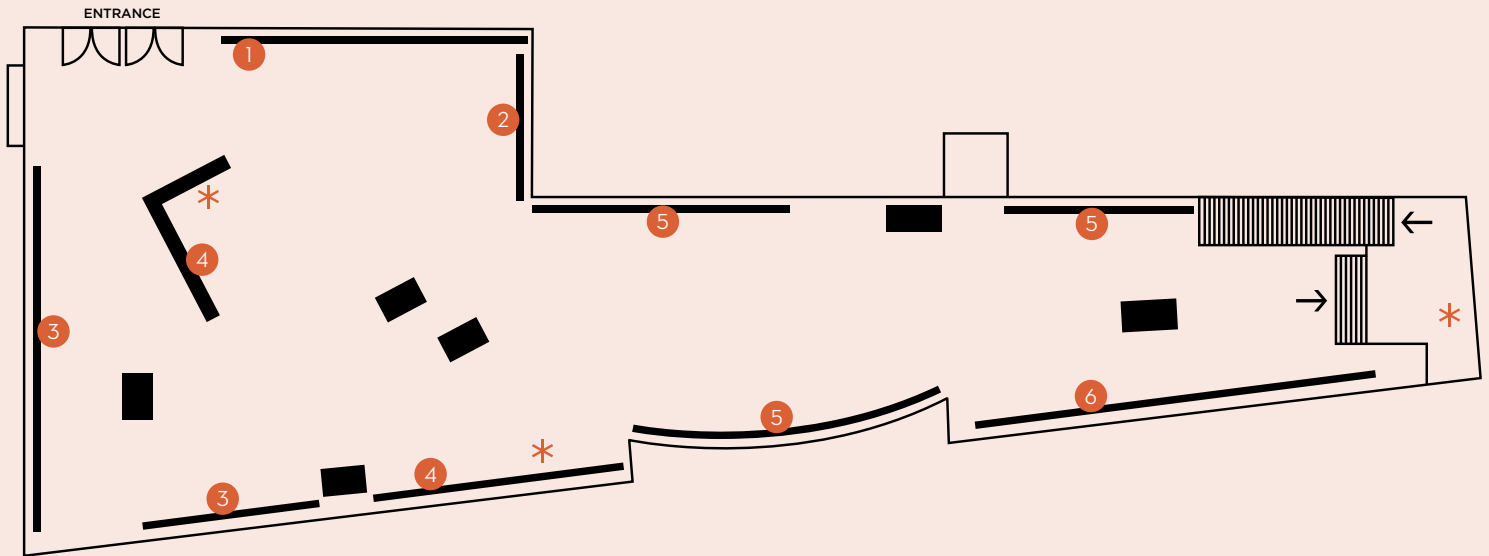
Munnings also portrayed the quietly heroic *Captain Prince Antoine of Orleans and Braganza* (1918). This realistic portrait is enhanced by impressionistic brushwork in the background, capturing the subject's spirit and creating visual tension through its detailed focus on the figure. The contrast between the meticulous details of the officer and the looser brushwork in the background elevates both the soldier and his mount. Together, these paintings provide a rich visual record of Canada's war effort and showcase an artist whose reputation was shaped by the conflict he sought to document.



### STUDY, SKETCH, HONOUR!

Examine the artifacts: veterinary tools, a taxidermy horse, swords and caps. These symbolize strength and service. In this Visual Arts lesson, create a still-life drawing that captures the form, texture, and stories these objects convey.

# EXHIBITION MAP



- 1 The Artist
- 2 Forging a Visual Identity
- 3 Devastation and Beauty
- 4 A Mobile Fighting Force
- 5 Supplying the War Machine
- 6 A Reputation Forged in War
- \* Point of Interest



## CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

During the exhibition, you can engage with the themes and artworks through extension assignments and classroom activities aligned with the Alberta Program of Studies.

Look for the symbol in the guide for deeper engagement opportunities. For resources such as lesson plans, worksheets, footnotes, and the bibliography, scan the QR code, or visit: [sway.cloud.microsoft/MpDVt5hIOAdOxtr8?ref=Link](https://sway.cloud.microsoft/MpDVt5hIOAdOxtr8?ref=Link)



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MONDAY – FRIDAY  
9:00 AM – 4:00 PM

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## COVER IMAGE:

*Halt on the March by a Stream at Nesle*  
Alfred Munnings, 1918  
Beaverbrook Collection of War Art  
Canadian War Museum  
19710261-0445