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Saturday, 27 January 2018

## INTERPRETATION IN BLOOM: WAR FLOWERS AT CAMPBELL HOUSE MUSEUM

WEEKEND EDITION

BY: SERENA YPELAAR & AMY INTRATOR

This past Tuesday, we had the privilege of attending the media preview for *WAR Flowers - A Touring Art Exhibition* at Campbell House Museum. The exhibition runs until March 25 and presents a fascinating new interpretation of the First World War through a century-old flower collection. Displayed alongside the work of multiple artists, *WAR Flowers* is a fresh take on a popular historical topic.

The exhibition is travelling across Canada, having already stopped at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. *WAR Flowers* was developed in a collaboration between filmmaker Viveka Melki and Alexander Reford, historian and Director of Les Jardins Metis/Reford Gardens in Grand-Métis, Quebec.

During World War I, Canadian soldier George Stephen Cantlie sent flowers home to his young daughter Celia in Montreal. A century later, the preserved blooms teach us how flowers can hold meaning, and more strikingly, how they embody the emotions that form the human experience of war.



Exterior of Campbell House Museum. Photo courtesy of Amy Intrator.

### New Perspectives

Bringing a new perspective to Canadian involvement in the First World War may sound like a near-impossible task. From memorials, to museums, to history class, most Canadians are familiarized with our country's monumental role in the war. *WAR Flowers*, however, manages to bring a new, human perspective to a familiar piece of history.

As the exhibition's curator, Viveka Melki explained that her background as a filmmaker partially



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informed the exhibition, but her perspective was also defined by her identity as an immigrant. Melki stated that she didn't grow up with the same familiarity with Canadian history. Canadian icons like A.Y. Jackson and John McCrae have their place in the exhibit, but these figures are featured alongside Julia Drummond, Percival Molson, and other Canadians involved in the war effort.

The exhibit doesn't rely on a familiarity with Canadian history. Rather, the exhibit reframes familiar and unfamiliar stories in a new light. The flowers featured in the exhibit are examined using floriography, a Victorian method of exploring emotion through flowers; this unusual approach allows new narratives and themes to emerge in the exhibit.



One of the original flowers featured in the WAR Flowers exhibit. Photo courtesy of Amy Intrator.

#### Integrating Art and Artifact:

The flowers from the archive of George Stephen Cantlie are some of the most striking pieces in the exhibit. Sent from Europe to Montreal during the First World War, the 100-year old collection is extremely valuable as one of the largest wartime flower collections. The flowers are important artifacts in their own right, but in the exhibit, each flower also becomes a way for multiple artists to explore themes related to war. For example, the poppy, which has often been viewed as a symbol of sleep, explores the theme of "Eternal Sleep." The theme is addressed through a short anecdote about John McCrae, along with an optical crystal sculpture created by Mark Raynes Roberts, and a customized scent created by Alexandra Bachand.



The "Eternal Sleep" section of the WAR Flowers exhibit. Photo courtesy of Amy Intrator.

Each of the ten flowers in the exhibit inspired artists to come together and create thoughtful pieces reflecting on war. Melki said that she tried to let each artist "have their voice," which is especially important in filmmaking. Melki described the process as four artists coming together to "make a statement," and this comes across as the exhibit weaves together the four artists'

individual but complementary impressions of war. The artists' creations work harmoniously, but individually each of the pieces engages the viewer differently. For example, the optical crystal sculptures created by Mark Raynes Roberts are literally illuminated by the lighting in the exhibit, which gives each of the detailed sculptures an even greater sense of depth and emotion.



The crystal sculpture featured in the "Resolve to Win" section of the WAR Flowers exhibit. Photo courtesy of Amy Intrator.

### Sensory Innovation

The exhibition uses scent and sound to captivate visitors. Individual alcoves - reminiscent of a gothic church's vaulted ceilings - feature each flower alongside stories of Canadian individuals involved with the war. We were transfixed by the individual scents Bachand created for each flower and its meaning, activated by pressing a button (see below)! This non-intrusive feature gave visitors the chance to engage directly with the experience; the use of scent is particularly evocative as it can trigger personal memories. Melki stated that the use of scent was important to her because it allows the exhibition to reach every visitor in a unique way. Given that smell is a powerful tool of remembrance, we found it fitting that *WAR Flowers* uses it to great advantage.

#### War Flowers- sensory experience



The exhibition also uses sound to transport visitors, from a buoyant classical score to sound effects evoking a sense of conflict - the music shifts seamlessly, interspersed with bouts of silence that we didn't notice until the music started again. One of the most memorable sounds is the skylark, which Melki explained is the national bird of the First and Second World War for Canadians. Melki chose not to include sounds like gunfire, as these could be triggering to certain individuals. She therefore strikes a careful balance, setting the mood with great sensitivity.

### New Directions

We were both engrossed in the various aspects of interpretation the WAR Flowers team synthesized to capture our interest and foster connections to the flower collection and the war stories. This multi-sensory exhibition demonstrates how exhibitions aren't merely the display of artifacts, but rather an experience inviting the visitor to engage emotionally with stories of real people.

After its Toronto run, the exhibition will travel to the Visitor Education Centre at the Canadian

National Vimy Memorial in France.

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Posted by Amy Intrator at 17:20

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