

Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal

University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

Reconstructing men from the operating table to the gallery: A study on the shifting context of male identity in Henry Tonks' pastel portraits of wounded soldiers

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Source: Groundings Undergraduate, November 2017, Vol. 10, pp. 131-147

Published by: Glasgow University Dialectic Society, University of Glasgow

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

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Reconstructing men from the operating table to the gallery:

A study on the shifting context of male identity in Henry Tonks' pastel portraits of wounded soldiers. Josephine Tipper

This study explores the changing interpretations of Henry Tonks' pastel drawings of disfigured soldiers from the aftermath of World War I. As the context evolved from a clinical environment to art historical, concerns developed not only regarding the reconstruction of the male body, but also the restoration of manhood after the First World War. The pre-War construction of masculinity, which turned man to machine, must also be evaluated in order to understand how Tonks' images might reinstate the wounded men's identities. The study examines the collective identity of British men during the First World War, focusing on those who were injured in battle. It compares Tonks' pastels with other sources, in order to understand the changing and fragile definition of masculinity from the aftermath of war, and the reconstruction of manhood and identity of disfigured soldiers.

This study will explore the changing interpretations of Henry Tonks' (1862-1937) pastel drawings of disfigured soldiers from the aftermath of the First World War. Tonks produced a series of pastel drawings of wounded soldiers from the First World War between 1916 and 1917, while working with pioneering plastic surgeon Harold Gillies. ¹ These half-sized illustrations were intended to aid further education of the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), and proved to be highly valuable, as they were not only anatomically correct, but also depicted torn flesh in a clearer, more diagrammatic way than the available photography. Tonks was the most obvious choice of artist for Gillies, as not only was he a renowned draughtsman, but he had also studied medicine and surgery in his earlier years.

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¹ Samuel J. M. M Alberti, "Military Medical Art at the Royal College of Surgeons." In War, Art and Surgery: The Work of Henry Tonks & Julia Midgley London: The Royal College of Surgeons of England, 2014, 6.

This gave him great anatomical knowledge, which surpassed the norm for artists, and his skill for drawing went beyond most in the medical profession.

The injured man, in art and British culture, has either been hailed as a martyred hero or neglected and hidden from sight. As Tonks' pastels do not conform to the prescribed iconography of the wounded martyr, they instead depict the taboo of men torn beyond recognition and ripped of their manhood. Tonks' background in both the medical and artistic professions gave him the ability to produce work that fuses the worlds of documentary and portraiture. Gillies, in particular, was able to draw attention to the aesthetic quality of plastic surgery, while Tonks' medical training made him acutely aware of the physicality of the subjects. He was also aware of the severity of their injuries, which gave him a unique insight into the impact of modern warfare. In a letter to Geoffrey Blackwell, Tonks wrote: 'It is a chamber of horrors... You bring flaps up [tube pedicles, a technique Gillies developed] from wherever is convenient.'

Tonks' pastels are often nameless, with little information for the modern reader. In medical illustrations there is a sense of anonymity, as the primary focus of the piece is the anatomical reading. However, as these images are of men's faces, it is hard not to seek some personal touch between sitter and viewer. Tonks drew each patient before and after surgery, including individuals who required numerous treatments. The combination of 'before' and 'after' shows both the physical changes made by the surgeon and the reconstruction of the patient's identity. The pairing of images is vital to this experience, such as Private Charles Deeks [Figures 1. and 2.], as the final 'after' image allows the viewer to look past the injuries and have a genuine empathetic interaction with the sitter. In the final images, the patients are almost always shown with neatly combed hair, and occasionally wearing ties and pressed collars with blue jackets. The image of patients well dressed with an air of confidence, suggests that not only have their faces been

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² Suzannah Biernoff, "Flesh Poems: Henry Tonks and the Art of Surgery." Visual Culture in Britain 11 (2010): 25-47, 28.

³ Henry Tonks to Blackwell, Geoffrey. 1915; Tonks to MacColl, Dugald Sutherland, 1915; and Tonks to MacColl, 1916, Quoted in Joseph Hone, The Life of Henry Tonks. London: Heinemann, 1939, 125, 114, and 114.

⁴ Marguerite Helmers "Iconic Images of Wounded Soldiers by Henry Tonks." *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 3 (2010): 181-99, 183.

⁵ Emma Chambers "Wounded Soldiers and the Memory of War." In *In War, Art and Surgery: The Work of Henry Tonks & Julia Midgley*, edited by Samuel J. M. M Alberti. London: The Royal College of Surgeons of England, 2014, 55.

⁶ Ibid, 57.

restored, but also their identities. In reality the wounded veterans found a return to civilian life difficult, with finding work particularly troublesome.

As new weapons and artillery were designed for maximum impact, it was vital new surgical techniques were developed that could help restore the devastated bodies of soldiers. Wounds were extremely complex, as skin and muscle were torn beyond preservation. The Somme provided one of the worst cases of mass facial injury in the history of warfare. At Gillies ward in Sidcup, 200 beds had been made ready for soldiers suffering from facial wounds. This was a vast underestimation, as over two thousand injured men arrived. Gillies recalled: Men without half their faces. Men burned and maimed to the condition of animals.

Facial disfigurement was weighed equally with the amputation of two or more limbs by the government as the most serious war injuries. ¹⁰ Those who suffered from them were entitled to the 100% disablement status from the Ministry of Pensions [Appendix 1.]. ¹¹ However, post-war aid for veterans tended to concentrate solely on employment, rather than reintegration into society. ¹² There were concerns about how these men might go back to living their lives. The number of mutilated bodies returning from war required that a new image of the 'everyday' man be constructed, which also had an effect on all British disabled people. ¹³

Physical mutilation was not the only loss suffered by men at war, as the destruction of their faces shattered their identities and questioned their manhood. T. H. Proctor, a veteran from the First World War, argued that war distilled the violent undertones of hegemonic masculinity. ¹⁴ Joanna Bourke aligns the construction of masculinity with the introduction of the 1870 Education Act, which made education to a minimum level compulsory for all. ¹⁵ The 1870 Act established

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⁷ Suzannah Biernoff "A Necessary Humanity." In War, Art and Surgery: The Work of Henry Tonks & Julia Midgley, edited by Samuel J. M. M Alberti. London: The Royal College of Surgeons of England, 2014, 121.

⁸ Ibid, 121.

⁹ Andrew Bamji "Facial Surgery: The Patient's Experience." In Facing Armageddon, edited by Hugh Cecil and Peter H. Liddle. London: Leo Cooper, 1996, 495.

Emma Chambers "Fragmented Identities: Reading Subjectivity in Henry Tonks' Surgical Portraits." Art History (2009): 578-607, 590.

¹¹ Joanna Bourke Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War London: Reaktion Books, 1999, 65-6.

¹² Chambers, Fragmented Identities, 590.

¹³ Biernoff, A Necessary Humanity, 16.

¹⁴ T. H. Proctor "The Motives of the Soldier." International Journal of Ethics 31 (1920): 26-50, 44

¹⁵ Bourke, Dismembering the Male, 13.

gender-based classes, instilling gendered associations with certain skills. Young girls were given cooking, cleaning and childcare classes, while boys were required to attend classes in manual training, which were designed to help prepare them for the workforce and equip them for male domestic duties. From a young age, boys were encouraged to be strong and active with competitive sport, which was a way of unleashing and controlling aggression. Injuries were a signifier for manhood, as Bourke describes blood as the 'badge of honour'. A masculinity was constructed that aligned fighting with integrity, within which there was no higher virtue than fighting for your country.

Before the war, hegemonic masculinity was encouraged and depicted in artwork through the representation of the ideal man: Christ. This was perpetuated by the embodiment of 'muscular Christianity', a term discussed by Donald E. Hall in his study on Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days.* Hall explains that Hughes' writing emphasises the spirituality of athleticism and the importance of conflict for displaying that good (English Christianity) will always conquer evil. Muscular Christianity was also a physical model for the British male: 'the ethereal body of the ideal Christian, the corporate body of "Young England" is always simultaneously material and immaterial, flesh and ideal.

One of the most direct constructions of masculinity is found within the images of war and the military, which suggests an 'unconquerable manhood'. During the early 1920s, representations of injured soldiers had strong religious connotations and often had a symbolic meaning which surpassed that of the physical broken body. They emphasised the analogy of heroic sacrifice, even overtly referring to Christ-like iconography. The divine image of the heroic, wounded soldier was far removed from reality, as machine warfare ravaged the bodies of men. Tonks' pastels depicted the soldiers' mortality and humanity, rather than elevating the injured veterans to sacred symbols. Tonks, himself, was no stranger to the saintly propaganda, which sought to justify and censor the violence of the front line. In

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¹⁶ Ibid, 13.

¹⁷ Ibid. 37

¹⁸ Donald E. Hall Muscular Christianity Embodying the Victorian Age. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 117.

¹⁹ Ibid, 117.

²⁰ Ibid, 119.

²¹ Gabriel Koureas Memory, Masculinity and National Identity in British Visual Culture, 1914-1930: A Study of 'Unconquerable Manhood'. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, 80.

²² Chambers, Wounded Soldiers and the Memory of War, 57.

1918, the British War Memorials Committee assembled a 'Hall of Remembrance' exhibition, which included Tonks' *An Advanced Dressing Station in France*, 1918 [Figure 3.].²³ The soldier's stance recalls a wounded *Pieta*, as his chest pushes outwards and his head rolls to the side; his body seems illuminated by a mysterious source of light. This piece was made at the same time as his pastels of patients in 1917, but is an embodiment of heroism and bravery, rather than a realistic documentation.

Wounded men were romanticised, as tales of women falling in love with the injured soldier they nursed to health became popular in film and media. Propaganda sought to elevate the position of the wounded soldier as 'not less but more of a man' to encourage others to go to war. Wartime imagery painted a patriotic and idealised scene of the fallen soldier, which clashed with the real and haunting illustrations made by Tonks. Suzannah Biernoff explains that the wounded face was a taboo, and any images of disfigurement were scarcely included in documents from the First World War. This did not reflect the number of injuries from the war, with around 60,500 suffering from facial wounds, compared to the 41,000 who had to undergo amputation. The press tended to omit those with facial injuries, and instead focused on amputees, whose prosthetic limbs fascinated readers.

There was a clear distinction between soldiers who had suffered from the loss of a limb and those who had significant facial injuries. Losing a limb in battle was seen as courageous, and depictions of amputees with 'angelic faces' flooded the public arena. Their bravery heightened their status as men, as the sacrifice they made was unavoidable from the public eye. While this was also true for facial disfigurement, the reaction was a clear contrast. Biernoff attributes this to the demasculinisation of facial deformity, as combatants' identity was stripped away. She compares the cosmetic process of fixing facial disfigurement, with the mechanical process of fitting a prosthetic limb. The former is considered feminine as it

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²³ Sue Malvern Modern Art, Britain and the Great War. New Haven and London Yale University Press, 2004, 76-89.

²⁴ Bourke, Dismembering the Male, 56.

²⁵ Unknown. "The Disabled Soldier." Liverpool Chronicle, June 1917.

²⁶ Biernoff, Flesh Poems: Henry Tonks and the Art of Surgery, 28.

²⁷ Ibid, 28

²⁸ Suzannah Biernoff "Shame, Disgust and the Historiography of War." In Shame and Sexuality: Psycho-Analysis and Visual Culture, edited by Claire Pajaczkowska and Ivan Ward. London: Routledge, 2008, 218.

²⁹ Suzannah Biernoff "The Rhetoric of Disfigurement in First World War Britain." Social History of Medicine 24 (2011): 666-85, 677.

focuses on aesthetics, while the latter is centred on movement and action, and so holds masculine connotations.

Despite the deep, personal sacrifice these men made, stigmatisation of the disabled soldier remained, as he contradicted the image of the 'strong and self-dependent man'. Douglas McMurtie argued that the recovery process reduced men to infantile states in the minds of the public. This sentiment can be found in R. Tait MacKenzie's text, who claimed that a man 'became nothing but a living gargoyle'. Plastic surgery was in its infancy, so regardless of the innovative procedures, injured men would never regain their original faces. A local newspaper described their injuries as the 'worst loss of all' as the wounds were 'visible proof' of the loss of a man's identity.

The fear of hurting the patient psychologically caused the authorities to remove all mirrors from the ward. ³⁴ Ana Carden-Coyne, Director of the Centre for the Cultural History of War, believes that Tonks' decision to keep his pastels away from public display was manifested by the social anxiety around the inability of these soldiers to integrate back into society. ³⁵ This stemmed from the fear that, not just these men, but society in its entirety, would be unable to recover from the aftermath of war. The disabled veterans not only represented the destruction caused by modern artillery, but were also a constant source of public guilt at the insurmountable loss in conflict.

The negative reception of wounded bodies in art went beyond Tonks' pastels. In 1919 John Middleton Murry wrote a review of John Singer Sargent's *Gassed* of 1919, from the exhibition titled *The Nation's War Painting*, exclaiming: 'a man with half his face shot away' is 'just such another piece of melodrama?' The contrast between Tonks' pastel portraits and the large genre paintings of the First World War is heightened by the reduction of drama in Tonks' images. However, they are just as poignant and emotional in terms of conveying the destruction of war. While

³⁰ Douglas Crawford McMurtrie The Disabled Soldier. Michigan: University of Michigan, 1919, 47.

³¹ Ibid, 47.

³² Koureas, Memory, Masculinity and National Identity in British Visual Culture, 138.

³³ Unknown. "The Queen's Hospital, Sidcup.": London Metropolitan Archives, 1918. H02/QM/Y01/05.

³⁴ Biernoff, A Necessary Humanity, 116.

³⁵ Ana Carden-Coyne "Ungrateful Bodies: Rehabilitation, Resistance and Disabled American Veterans of the First World War." European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire 14 (2007): 543-65, 544.

³⁶ John Middleton Murry "Review." London: The Nation, 1919, 419-420.

Sargent's Gassed tells of the devastating impact on groups of men, Tonks' work portrays the individual.

Sander Gilman explains that the aim of these wounded men was to be able to 'pass' as normal'. However, Biernoff states that 'passing' and being invisible are very different. Gilman defines passing as 'becoming differently visible - being seen as a member of a group with which one wants or needs to identify. 38 He concludes that there is no distinct line between cosmetic and reconstructive surgery, as, throughout time, our perception of 'normal' changes.³⁹ An ongoing and prevalent belief has also maintained that a person's outward appearance reflects their personality, which perpetuated an aesthetic standard in order to 'fit-in' to society. The period after First World War, saw a resurgent interest throughout Western Europe in physiognomy. The concept was popularised by Johann Caspar Lavater who reintroduced the Aristotelian theories of the relationship between appearance and character. 40 Returning to the pairing of 'before' and 'after' pieces by Tonks (Figures 4, and 5.), they also recall photographs produced to depict the success of cosmetic surgery. 41 Emma Chambers discusses Gilman's observations on how the 'before' and 'after' images show not only the success of the operation, but also the transformation of the personality. 42 This metamorphosis is apparent in the 'after' images by Tonks, which often includes clothing, combed hair and a cheerful expression lacking in their 'before' counterparts.

A primary function of Tonks' pastels was to aid their healing process by promoting a new identity. His clinical eye allowed him to gaze at the men, and capture their recovery without succumbing to voyeuristic, or melodramatic tendencies. Significantly altering facial features would be expected in someway to affect their mental state. Didier Anzieu, a French psychoanalyst, in his book *The Skin Ego*, discusses the importance of skin, as he develops Sigmund Freud's *The Ego and the Id*, arguing that tactile sensations are primary to the formation of the ego. ⁴³ He describes the skin as 'a protective envelope' which contains and preserves the

³⁷ Sander L Gilman Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, xxi.

³⁸ Ibid, xxi.

³⁹ Ibid, xxi

⁴⁰ Johann Caspar Lavater Essays on Physiognomy: For the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind. edited by Thomas Holcroft London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1789.

Chambers, Fragmented Identities, 598.

⁴² Gilman, Making the Body Beautiful, 36-40.

⁴³ Didier Anzieu "The Skin Ego." New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989, 85 and Sigmund Freud "The Ego and the Id." In Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, edited by James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1961.

psyche.⁴⁴ Tonks' torn flesh reminds the viewer that humans are all the same beneath the surface, and the revealing of what lies underneath is quite terrifying as it reminds viewers of their mortality. Skin forms a thin, easily damaged veil, which hides the uncomfortable reality of the fragility of the human species. These injuries expose what should not be exposed, and the viewer is confronted by the temporality of existence. Gillies' surgeries attempt to rebuild the mask of this reality.

Furthermore, a person's psychical identity is formed through tactile sensory imprints and the marks left from those experiences. ⁴⁵ Chambers references Anzieu's work, and explains that this would suggest any damage on the real skin would also be felt by the ego. ⁴⁶ She further argues that this disruption of boundaries makes the images hard to read as portraiture, as they occupy the uncharted territory of medical records and portraits. The puncturing of flesh makes it difficult to see past the violence and interpret the characteristics and identity of the sitter. ⁴⁷ The anxiety felt when looking at these images can also be related to the projection of the self by the ego, and the viewers' acute awareness of how easily it can be dismantled. ⁴⁸

Tonks' pastels depict not just the destructive effects of modern artillery but also the pioneering efforts of modern medicine: 'if servicemen were severely injured by the technologies of modern war, they could be made whole again through technologies of modern medicine.'⁴⁹ Overall, the archival value of these images surpasses their role as medical documents, as they depict the physical reconstruction of wounded soldiers, and show the rebuilding of each man's identity. Gillies' surgeries allowed these men to reintegrate into society, and helped them to 'pass' for 'normal'. The physical reconstruction had a social and economic impact on these men, but it also restored their manhood. Disability, facial disfigurement, in particular, was widely stigmatised before and after the First World War, due to superstition, fear and public guilt. These pastels may represent a stage in the rebuilding of these men's lives after their traumatic and life changing ordeals.

The First World War caused a rift in gender roles, and rocked the fragile conception of class, status and masculinity. Men had been built into machines to

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⁴⁴ Anzieu, The Skin Ego, 98-101.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 98-101

⁴⁶ Chambers, Fragmented Identities, 596.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 596.

⁴⁸ Ibid 596

⁴⁹ Helmers, Iconic Images of Wounded Soldiers by Henry Tonks, 184.

fight for war, but once peace was settled, they were owed the return of their personhood and a readmission to society. The heroic idealised male adorned stoic genre paintings. In reality, the disfigured veteran was the strongest signifier of the destruction and devastation of war. The image of the mutilated soldier caused crippling public anxiety, as it reminded them of their mortality and the violence of modern warfare. Tonks' pastels show the healing process, not just of the wounded men, but of the British national identity.

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Illustrations



Figure 1. Henry Tonks, *Charles Deeks Before Surgery*, 1916. London. Pastel on Paper. 27×20 cm. Source: Royal College of Surgeons of England, reference number: RCSSC/P 569.1.

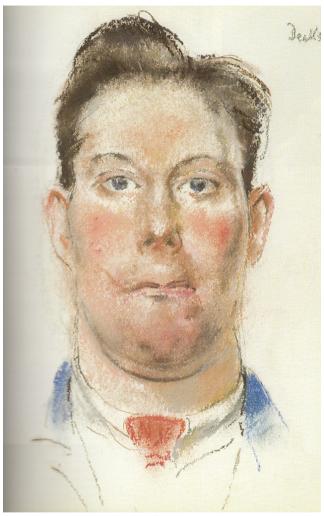


Figure 2. Henry Tonks, *Charles Deeks After Surgery*, 1916. London. Pastel on Paper. 28×21 cm. Source: Royal College of Surgeons of England, reference number: RCSSC/P 569.2.



Figure 3. Henry Tonks, *An Advanced Dressing Station in France*, 1918. London. Oil on Canvas. 182.8 x 218.4 cm. Source: Imperial War Museum Collections.



Figure 4. Photograph of Charles Deeks before Surgery, 3 July 1916. London. Source: Royal College of Surgeons of England, reference number: MS0513/1/1/553.

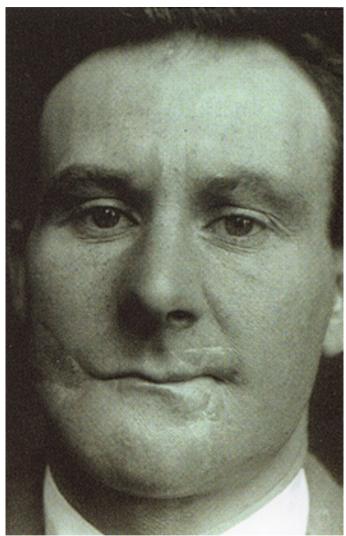


Figure 5. Photograph of Charles Deeks after Surgery, 18 August 1922. London. Source: Royal College of Surgeons of England, reference number: MS0513/1/1/553. Appendix

Proportion Corresponding to Degree of Disablement

Specific Injury	Proportion of Pension
1. Loss of two or more limbs, loss of an arm and an eye, loss of a leg and an eye, loss of both hands or all fingers and thumbs, loss of both feet, loss of a hand or a foot, total loss of sight, total paralysis, lunacy, wounds or disease resulting in a man being permanently bedridden, wounds to internal organs or head involving total permanent disability, very severe facial disfigurement	100%
2. Amputation of right arm at shoulder joint	90%
 Amputation of leg at hip or left arm at shoulder joint, severe facial disfigurement, total loss of speech 	80%
 Short thigh amputation of leg or of right arm above or through elbow, total deafness 	70%
 Amputation of leg above knee (other than 4) and through knee or of left arm above or through elbow, or of right arm below elbow 	60%
 Amputation of leg below knee or the left arm below elbow, loss of vision of one eye 	50%
 Loss of thumb or of four fingers of right hand 	40%
 Loss of thumb or four fingers of left hand, or of three fingers of right hand 	30%
9. Loss of two fingers of either hand	20%

(Source: Ministry of Pensions leaflet, c. 1920).

Appendix 1. Ministry of Pensions Leaflet, Table: War Pensions for Physical Injury, c.1920. Source: Bourke, Joanna. *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* London: Reaktion Books, 1999.