

Exhibit Reviews – World War I and New Jersey

- **“Over There, Over Here,” Cornelius Low House, Piscataway New Jersey**
- **“Embattled Emblems: Posters and Flags of the First World War,” New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, New Jersey**
- **“Shifting Views: Artists Who Experienced World War I,” New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, New Jersey**

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April 2017 marked the centennial anniversary of the United States entering World War I under President Woodrow Wilson. Museums and universities across the U.S. celebrated this anniversary with exhibits dedicated to World War I and the men and women who served on the home front and abroad. These exhibits were created to bring to life the people and time period of World War I in order to educate the public that this was the “war to end all wars” and yet, did not.

New Jersey had a very active role in the war. The state was the number one contributor to building munitions for the allies as well as the site for a major act of terrorism, the explosion at Black Tom Island in Hoboken. It is only fitting that many of the state museums and universities are celebrating this significant anniversary. This review will cover three local exhibits dedicated to New Jersey and World War I.

The first is “Over There, Over Here: New Jersey During WWI” at the Cornelius Low House in Piscataway. The other two exhibits, “Embattled Emblems: Posters and Flags of the First World War” and “Shifting Views: Artists Who Experienced World War I” are both located at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton.

I found the “Over There, Over Here” exhibit to be a well-rounded example of New Jersey’s role in the Great War effort overseas. The exhibit encompasses all seven rooms of the house with each room having a different theme. The first floor of the museum is dedicated to the backdrop of the war and events leading up to the American entrance into the war. The museum’s first exhibit room showcases the background information leading up to the war for the European nations –

timeline, backstory of conflict, and previous wars. Also included on the first floor were details of the NJ based soldiers stationed at Camp Dix (now Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst) and Sea Girt. Display cases were filled with artifacts loaned from other museums and private citizens. Mannequin forms wearing soldiers' uniform as well as a pup tent were on display. In the side cupboards were Army issued artifacts such as boots, a doughboy helmet, mess kit, and canteen, just to name a few.

The second floor of the museum centers on the different groups of people who contributed to the war effort with particular attention paid to women and African Americans. While women may not have served in combat in roles, they did their part on the homefront and abroad. The exhibit explores Radium Girls, The Red Cross, and the lives of Alice Paul and Edith Warton, who were living abroad at the time. African Americans played a major role in the war. This exhibit did a great job showcasing their contributions and the reality of war for African Americans in a prejudiced army. Other items found on the second floor were propaganda posters for Liberty Loans and War Bonds as well as an interactive option to play war-time music which included the sheet music for some of those songs.

This exhibit did an impressive job of including the events that pushed America to finally enter the war. The sinking of the *Lusitania*, the Black Tom Island explosion, the Zimmerman Telegram, and Wilson's declaration of War are examples of these occurrences. With the help of outside sources, this exhibit was well thought out and focused on many different facets of the war. As a museum professional, I appreciate the inclusion of guest curators and the creation of an advisory committee for the exhibit. It shows a partnership with other museums, museum professionals, and historians who came together to produce a comprehensive exhibit. Many times,

museum professionals are too close to their subject matter which can make it difficult to create a clear and concise exhibit or tour.

“Embattled Emblems: Posters and Flags of the First World War” at the State Museum of NJ showcases 40 propaganda posters that could have been found in municipal buildings, train stations, etc, during the Great War. The museum did a nice job grouping the posters together by theme: Liberty Bonds, YMCA, Red Cross, etc. Each poster had a text panel with the author of the poster and brief description. Many of the authors were NJ natives. While many of these posters are familiar to the public, much more of them are not and it allows visitors to gain a better understanding of the influence of these posters during wartime. In the interior section were several portraits of young men who served with their NJ regimental flags below them. The museum has a QR code for visitors to scan with their smartphones which pulls up each soldier’s service record. In this digital age, the use of QR codes is a great way to involve the younger generation who are interested in history. As with the Cornelius Low House, they had World War I music playing with the lyrics available so you could follow along. Also found with the posters was a bust of President Woodrow Wilson with part of his speech declaring war. Mannequin forms dressed in World War Uniforms are also on display. The museum has two interactive stations – one was creating your own poppy flower and/or creating your own World War I poster with magnets. The other “interactive” section which I thought was very smart was a little reading corner with several World War I books on display for those interested. Overall, it was a very nice, well organized exhibit.

The second exhibit at the State Museum was, “Shifting Views: Artists Who Experienced World War I.” This showcases several pieces of artwork created by men who served in the war. Next to each piece was a text panel of the artist, what they did in the war, and the aftermath effects on their lives. While many of these men suffered shell shock, they at least had an outlet to express

what they had been through. There were several pieces that depicted patriotism for this country, but many pieces reflect how torn and misplaced they must have felt after seeing what they saw on the front. One can only imagine after seeing some of their artwork.

Overall, all three exhibits were curated well and showcased different phases of the war. It was interesting to me that the State museum only included propaganda posters, flags and the art work, while the exhibit at the Cornelius Low House more successfully encompassed NJ's efforts and heritage during the war. It feels as if these three exhibits should trade places. The state museum is supposed to represent the state of NJ and while these posters were a fine example of how people could have reacted to the war, I don't think it gave NJ its proper due.

With 2017 and even 2018 being centennial years for the beginning and end of the Great War, many exhibits will overlap in the material displayed. The use of propaganda posters and music is probably the most notable of the war. These were both prevalent and influential in encouraging the public to do their part for the war effort. Posters encouraged the public to buy Liberty Bonds/Loans and cut down on food use, while the music showcased what many soldiers were feeling while overseas – it allowed the public to catch a glimpse of what our boys were going through. Seeing these colorful and purposefully drawn posters or hearing “It's a Long Long Way to Tipperary” brings the public back to this era which is long forgotten.

These exhibits which celebrate this centennial anniversary are important for understanding New Jersey's role in World War I. They bring to life so many diverse aspects of the war and allow visitors to see where we were as a nation and the tremendous growth after the war.

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