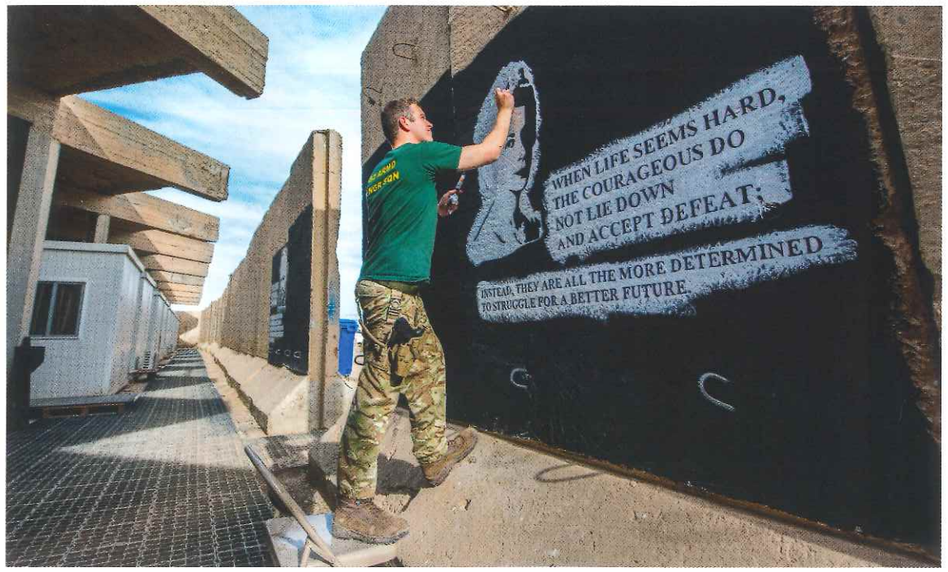
Focusing on art made by the British Armed Forces over the past 200 years, a new exhibition at Compton Verney explores the creativity of soldiers. From quilts fashioned from used army blankets to collaborations between veterans and contemporary artists, the works reveal often surprising narratives about both the professional and private lives of service personnel. Here the show's curators, *Holly Furneaux* and *Amy Orrock*, select six key pieces from the 50 displayed

CREATED IN CONFLICT THE ART OF WAR



QUEEN AND COUNTRY

Blast Wall Mural, 2016
by Sapper Adam Williams, photographed by Corporal Nick Johns, during Operation Shader 3, Iraq

Sapper Adam Williams' blast wall painting in Camp Taji, Iraq, is an example of soldiers customising their living spaces to create a comforting sense of home. Beside a black-and-white portrait of a young Queen Elizabeth II, the mural quotes her Christmas broadcast of 2008, in which she connected the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War with the Army's continuing service in Iraq and Afghanistan: 'When life seems hard, the courageous do not lie down and accept defeat.' Spr Williams' work follows the format of an existing mural featuring a Winston Churchill image and quotation, and was made using a paintbrush improvised by taping the bristles from a broom to a pencil. Williams explains: 'I thought it would reinforce our British area, a reminder to other nations who pass by... that we were there and proud, doing our part in the coalition.' Despite the mural's patriotic content, photographer Corporal Nick Johns, who wanted to capture Williams' large-scale art, also found it 'an ice-breaker between us and the other nations as they would stop and talk to us about it, which helped build relationships between individuals'.

The core star figure, with its vivid red and gold, is reminiscent of a shell burst

MILITARY DISCIPLINE

The Brayley Quilt, c1864-77
by Francis Brayley, pieced wool, lined with damask

The Brayley Quilt shows the scale of work possible in downtime even for those soldiers with fairly basic sewing proficiency. Owned and probably produced by Private Francis Brayley, 1st, 11th Foot Regiment (the Devonshire Regiment), while he was stationed in India in the 1860s and 1870s, its production may have relieved the tedium of his posting, providing an alternative distraction from the extreme heat to gambling or the canteen. The fabric was most probably offcuts supplied by the regimental tailor. Despite the complexity of the design, an examination of the back of the Brayley Quilt reveals rudimentary stitching, consisting of a basic whip- or over-stitch using a thick thread or several strands of twisted hemp. The exactly replicated size of the fabric hexagons suggests the small pieces were 'punched', possibly using a leather or fabric tool. With geometric accuracy, a central starburst is held inside interlocking patterns featuring stars and hexagons. The core star figure, with its vivid red and gold, is reminiscent of a shell burst, carefully contained within the spatial logic of the larger pattern. The precision – military discipline, even – with which the several thousand hexagons are pieced together suggests that for soldiers at war patchworking could provide a sense of order in unfamiliar or uncontrollable environments.

WILLIAMS: COURTESY THE ARTIST. BRAYLEY: © VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

MEMORIES OF LOSS

Swift and Bold Jug and Rifleman Hiles' IED Brush, 2014
by Christopher McHugh, porcelain, glaze, pink lustre, decals, mixed media
Christopher McHugh's *Swift and Bold Jug* draws upon his collaboration with members of Third Battalion, The Rifles (3 Rifles) to make ceramic works of art in response to their experiences fighting in Helmand during Operation Herrick 11 (October 2009-April 2010). The soldiers brought with them significant objects connected to the campaign, and many of them also discussed their tattoos memorialising dead comrades or family members. Tattooing, with its long military and maritime tradition, continues to be a significant practice of soldier art, in which the body itself is inscribed with war experiences, especially loss. McHugh's jug intersperses tattoos with lucky charms, creating a durable repository for these memories in the form of an object that speaks to a long tradition of trench art by recalling inscribed First World War shell-case vases and jugs. Soldiers' day-to-day work often requires high levels of dexterity and precision, skills that are honoured in McHugh's ceramic piece *Rifleman Hiles' IED Brush*. McHugh's ceramic is a cast of the domestic paintbrush that was used by rifleman Lee Hiles to excavate improvised explosive devices during his patrols in Afghanistan; the brush is marked with a tally for each device detected. McHugh's casting of this everyday object recognises the artistry implicit in the delicate work of IED removal – the humble paintbrush becomes an object literally poised between life and death.

> The humble paintbrush becomes an object poised between life and death

WOOD: © HUNTERIAN MUSEUM AT THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS. MCHUGH: COURTESY THE ARTIST

NEEDLE AND THREAD

Private Thomas Walker, 1856
by Thomas William Wood, oil on canvas
Thomas William Wood's painting of Private Thomas Walker propped up in bed sewing is in many ways an unlikely representation of a soldier. Look closely and clues are there – the card on the wall behind Walker's bed asserts that he is recovering from a head wound, sustained at the Battle of Inkerman during the Crimean War, and the small triangles that he is stitching together have been snipped from the crimson, gold and black fabric of army uniforms. Walker was visited by Queen Victoria during his stay in an invalids' hospital in Fort Pitt, Kent, and she described his recovery in her journal as 'a most extraordinary case'. Walker had learned to quilt in hospital with help from a fellow soldier's wife, and occupied his recovery time making and selling his textiles to visitors, including the Queen, and donating the profits to the relatives of his fellow patients. Wood's painting of Walker sewing offers a variety of forms of comfort – snowy white linens suggest exemplary hospital hygiene, the skill of his surgeon is emphasised in the card above the bed, and Walker is presented as usefully repurposed in exchanging gun and bayonet for needle and thread. Yet the painting also conveys an uneasiness, which is typically produced by the reclaiming of war materials in trench art. Walker's face is unreadable as he stitches together the surplus of available 'scrap' uniforms, an enduring reminder of those soldiers killed by the conflict that Walker has narrowly survived.

FACING THE FUTURE

The Queen's Hospital for Facial Injuries, Frognal, Sidcup: The Toy-Makers' Shop, c1918
John Hodgson Lobley, oil on canvas
During the First World War, occupational therapy was established in military hospitals, with wounded men learning rehabilitative arts and handicrafts including embroidering, crochet, basket-weaving and rug-making. The Queen's Hospital for Facial Injuries, in Sidcup, was the first hospital dedicated to treating facial injury and a pioneer of reconstructive surgery. Therapy was an integral part of rehabilitation, with toy-making the most subscribed workshop at the hospital. However, John Hodgson Lobley's oil painting of the toy-makers' shop at Sidcup disrupts any easy asso
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THE STAINS OF LIFE

Peace Maker, 2014
by Susan Stockwell, textile and discarded army blankets
Working with soldiers in rehabilitation and support centres, the contemporary artist Susan Stockwell produced another form of military quilt as part of the National Army Museum's 'Piece Makers' project. Stockwell used the patchwork form to combine hopeful narratives of recovery with the often painful, unsettled stories of veterans' experiences. *Peace Maker* incorporates panels of art produced by the soldiers she worked with, including a striking screen-print by veteran Michael Crossan. The double-sided design of the quilt refers to the textile culture of regimental banners and flags. On one face is a silken peace banner, while on the other side is a chequerboard design composed primarily of used army blankets in buff and dark grey, which bear faint stains of the lives of the servicemen and women who have touched them. The choice of used, stained materials connects this modern quilt to the long history of military patchwork, in which the work often takes its force from direct contact with soldiers' bodies. As Stockwell described it, the quilt provided a 'good metaphor to hang a range of ideas on', her work being both recuperative, 'stitching people's lives back together', and a recognition of 'different lives' that can't always be re

> Stockwell used the patchwork form to combine narratives of recovery with painful veterans' experiences

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