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'We're not men now': design as pathos at the Lord Roberts Memorial Workshops

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PROPOSAL TITLE: *'We're not men now': design as pathos at the Lord Roberts Memorial Workshops*

PROPOSAL ABSTRACT: Although founded in 1900 as a scheme for the 'employment of disabled soldiers' and re-named the Soldiers' and Sailors' Help Society in 1904, the Lord Roberts Memorial Workshops (LRMW) were not officially constituted until the First World War had fully commenced. Taking their name from Lord Roberts, one of the most revered military figures of the Victorian era who had died just as the war began, its founder, the philanthropist, Mary Jane Brabazon, the Countess of Meath, sought to establish an enterprise that was not a customary charity but rather a business giving secure work to combatants maimed in conflict. Officially launched in the spring of 1915 by the end of the war it was estimated that the enterprise had provided employment for thousands of men, had production facilities and retail premises throughout Britain and was employing celebrity designers. Of the many similar ventures founded before, during and after the First World War that used craft to ameliorate shocking levels of poverty and destitution amongst demobilised veterans, the LRMW enjoyed perhaps the greatest popularity and longevity. Although they made a wide range of domestic and utilitarian products the workshops were established with the 'intention of capturing the German toy trade'. The men in the workshops were often referred to as 'childlike' and attitudes to, and popular patronage of, the workshops largely pivoted on the equation of design and pathos as toys became a site where feelings of pity, guilt, shame and fear at the sight of the disaffected and disabled could be assuaged through the innocuous and innocent act of consumption. The culture of infantilisation promoted in the LRMW was far from lost on the men in the workshops where tensions often erupted in labour disputes and strikes. Working with previously undocumented archive material this paper seeks to interrogate the anxieties that arose around modern craft, concepts of conventional masculinity and the material culture of conflict in early twentieth century Britain by looking in detail at surviving objects and images.

AUTHOR BIO: Dr. Joseph McBrinn was educated and has worked in Ireland, Scotland and France. He holds an MA (Hons) in art history from the University of Glasgow and a PhD in art history from the National College of Art and Design, Dublin. He has taught at the art schools in Dublin and Belfast since 2000. He is an Irish art historian, and he also writes about a broad range of art, craft and design history. Recently he has published on the intersecting histories of gender, sexuality and disability in modern art, craft and design in several journals (*Textile: Cloth and Culture; The Journal of Design History; The Journal of Modern Craft*). He has also written extensively on the craft workshops associated with the First and Second World Wars as well as the crafts produced during the Northern Irish Troubles (1969-1998). His most recent publication is the monograph *Queering the Subversive Stitch: Men and the Culture of Needlework* (Bloomsbury, 2021).