

# Artistry from Agony

Saint Mary's Museum of Art commemorates the 100th anniversary of World War I

By Laurie Snyder

## Life in LAMORINDA



From left, specially trained volunteer Julie Kline, Museum Registrar Julie Armistead and Museum Director Carrie Brewster at Saint Mary's College Museum of Art carefully begin uncrating and inspecting works of World War I trench art Jan. 10 in preparation for display as part of the acclaimed exhibition, "From Swords to Plowshares." Photo Ohlen Alexander

"Bombardment, barrage, curtain-fire, mines, gas, tanks, machine-guns, hand-grenades – words, words, but they hold the horror of the world." – Erich Maria Remarque, "All Quiet on the Western Front"

Europe's flowering youth scythed senselessly from Flanders Fields, gassed and left gasping final breaths at Ypres Salient. Callow aristocrats cut down by crusty coal miners. Ploughmen purged not by the pens of poets – but by their flame throwers. It was the time of "The Great War" – World War I – the first in which chemical warfare was used, the first in which civilians dodged man-made death raining from the skies, and the first of the 20th century

in which survivors witnessed the depravity of genocide.

Although the world would be brought to its knees by the time guns fell silent at the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918, humanity did not realize, as 1914 dawned, that it was heading into the seventh circle of hell. Sixteen million combatants and civilians were killed by the war and its fallout of famine and disease. Rudyard Kipling went to his grave in 1936 without ever finding his only son's body. J.R.R. Tolkien, future author of "The Lord of the Rings," contracted trench fever during front-line duty on the Somme – one of the more than 21 million eventually counted among the wounded.

Many suffered from shell shock – what we now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Now, thanks to Saint Mary's College Museum of Art, additional light is being shed on this seminal period in world history. Beginning Feb. 2, "From Swords to Plowshares: Metal Trench Art from World War I" will feature more than 150 metal objects created by artists from virtually all of the countries that were involved in the conflict, says Heidi Donner, manager of education and public information for the museum. She describes the exhibition as "a powerful mix of art and history."

Visitors will experience the war in profoundly personal ways via veterans' interviews, film footage and pe-

riod music while viewing remarkable works of art.

"The ingenuity and skill range from primitive decorated artillery shell cases executed in trenches to elaborately embellished artillery shell lamps, vases, cigarette lighters, and ashtrays exhibiting extraordinary craftsmanship. The pieces are as varied and unique as the military and civilian artists who created them," says Donner.

"Unlike commissioned paintings and war memorials, which represented war from a distance, trench art was made from the waste of war itself and utilized the vehicles of death and mutilation directly," writes British archaeologist Nicholas Saunders, Ph.D., author of "Trench Art: Lost Worlds of the Great War."

"Trench art was made for a variety of practical reasons – for sale, barter and personal use – but could also possess deeper spiritual meanings associated with religious belief, grief and mourning, and relief or guilt at surviving war when so many did not."

Kicking off the exhibition will be award-winning author, Adam Hochschild. A former editor of *Mother Jones* and current journalism teacher at the University of California, Berkeley, Hochschild also wrote "King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa." His most recent book, "To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918," explores the interplay between generals, cabinet ministers, ordinary trench soldiers, and pacifists. ... continued on page B4



A quiet moment in German trenches  
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