

# John Brahms Trinick and World War I

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As a student on a placement with the Ian Potter Museum of Art in 2014, I was asked to explore the effects of World War I on the life and career of artist John Brahms Trinick (1890–1974), who served in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) from 1916 to 1919. The starting point for this research was an examination of two sketchbooks dating to those war years and recently presented to the University of Melbourne Art Collection in memory of Ms Ruth Trinick, a niece of the artist.

The centenary of the Gallipoli campaign has brought to light the personal stories of many of those Australians who served in World War I. Diaries and letters have been investigated and found to communicate the thoughts and dreams of soldiers, while sketchbooks have given us a visual record of artists under wartime conditions. In this context is timely to consider the effect of World War I on John Trinick, who revisited Australia only briefly after the war, soon returning to England to complete his training in the arts and pursue a career as a stained glass artist and ecclesiastical craftsman.

Although John Trinick did not write or draw details of a soldier's daily experience (unlike many other artists, including his friend Napier Waller), his sketchbooks and

drawings, some made on paper provided by Australian Red Cross, reflect his courage, endurance and determination to continue to develop as an artist, despite being transported to a challenging environment and having limited art materials available. They also reveal an Australian artist who became more familiar with, and involved in, European artistic traditions through war service.

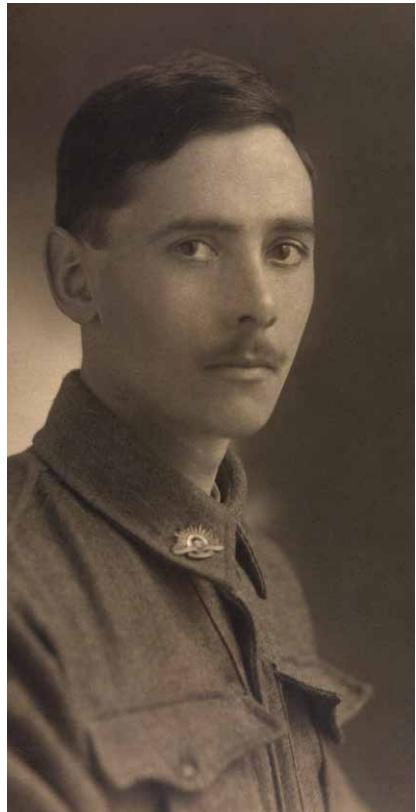
## The John Trinick Collection at the University of Melbourne

We can research Trinick's creative life's work thanks to the generosity and loving care of the Trinick family, who have made two major donations to the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne. The first was in 1997, when 'Mr Harold Trinick donated a study collection of the work of his uncle, stained glass artist and ecclesiastical craftsman John Trinick (1890–1974).'<sup>1</sup> This was followed by another substantial gift by the family in 2013 made in memory of Ruth Trinick, which comprises artworks, preparatory material, sketchbooks, working drawings and designs, all donated to the University of Melbourne Art Collection, managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art.

Documentary and photographic materials were given to the University of Melbourne Archives. In her comprehensive examination of the life and art of John Trinick, Fiona Moore observes the depth and scope of these resources: the John Trinick Study Collection at the University of Melbourne is 'a visual art collection and the archive of a craftsman', as well as providing an 'invaluable insight into Trinick's creative process and the history of stained glass design'.<sup>2</sup> The 2013 gift also contains many items conveying Trinick's thoughts, feelings and artistic process while an enlisted soldier in World War I.

Early influences on Trinick's development as an artist established enduring themes and preoccupations in his creative practice. He was born in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Richmond in 1890 and commenced study at the National Gallery School in the city in 1910. While studying, he won five prizes for his art, including first prize for drawing in 1911.<sup>3</sup> He also met artists Napier Waller and Christian Yandell, who were to become his lifelong friends.<sup>4</sup> Waller and Trinick shared many influences, including an interest in the Arts and Crafts movement, which emphasised craftsmanship in art and was influential for both of them in their development as stained glass artists.

John B. Trinick as a soldier, c. 1916–19, photograph, 13.0 × 8.5 cm. Unit 5, reference no. 2013.0049, donated in memory of Ruth Trinick, John B. Trinick Archive Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.



By 1915, Trinick, Waller and Yandell were listed as members of the Victorian Artists' Society. After the war, Waller and Yandell married and decided to live in Australia, while Trinick emigrated to England, going on to become an esteemed stained glass artist.

Napier Waller also continued his stained glass career and designed 'The

Leckie window', which survived the fire that partly destroyed Wilson Hall at the University of Melbourne in 1952.<sup>5</sup> This stained glass window is now permanently installed in the Ian Potter Museum of Art, where many of Trinick's stained glass designs are housed, maintaining a link between the two artists that began early in the 20th century.

Melbourne was a stimulating environment for Trinick and Waller to study art, surrounded as they were by a lively culture informed by an awareness of major English art movements, in particular the Pre-Raphaelites, who would influence Trinick's later drawings and stained glass designs.<sup>6</sup> In 1906 William Holman Hunt's enormously popular allegorical painting of Christ, *The light of the world* (1853), was exhibited in Melbourne as part of an international tour, giving Trinick an opportunity to see a Pre-Raphaelite painter's work, in addition to works by this artist held by the National Gallery of Victoria.<sup>7</sup>

Trinick was interested in mysticism, particularly the doctrine of Theosophy, which was explored by a number of artists in Melbourne, including one of Trinick's teachers at the National Gallery School, Frederick McCubbin.<sup>8</sup> This provided Trinick with an alternative way to

develop his practice, going beyond realism and using legends and spiritual symbols to express his interpretation of the ineffable. Trinick was also interested in Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, alchemy and other aspects of ancient spirituality.<sup>9</sup>

### A career interrupted

As for many young Australians, Trinick's career was interrupted as it began to unfold in Melbourne. Both John Trinick and Napier Waller enlisted for active service in the AIF, with Trinick embarking from Melbourne with the 8th Infantry Battalion on the troop ship HMAT *Nestor* on 2 October 1916.<sup>10</sup>

Trinick experienced many tribulations during his active service as a signaller and observer, including hospitalisation on 15 December 1917 for pyrexia (fever); he was sent back to duty on 26 February 1918.<sup>11</sup> He was severely wounded in France on 23 April 1918 and admitted to Reading War Hospital in England on 29 April, returning to active duty on 1 July.<sup>12</sup> On 1 August 1919 he left England to return to Melbourne and was discharged from the AIF on 6 November, after which he returned to his mother's home in Liddiard Street, Glenferrie (now Hawthorn), for a short time before leaving Australia for England late in 1919.<sup>13</sup>

John B. Trinick, *Tilshead Church*, 10 June 1917,  
pencil on paper, 12.5 × 17.7 cm. Accession no.  
2013.0343, gift in memory of Ruth Trinick  
2013, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

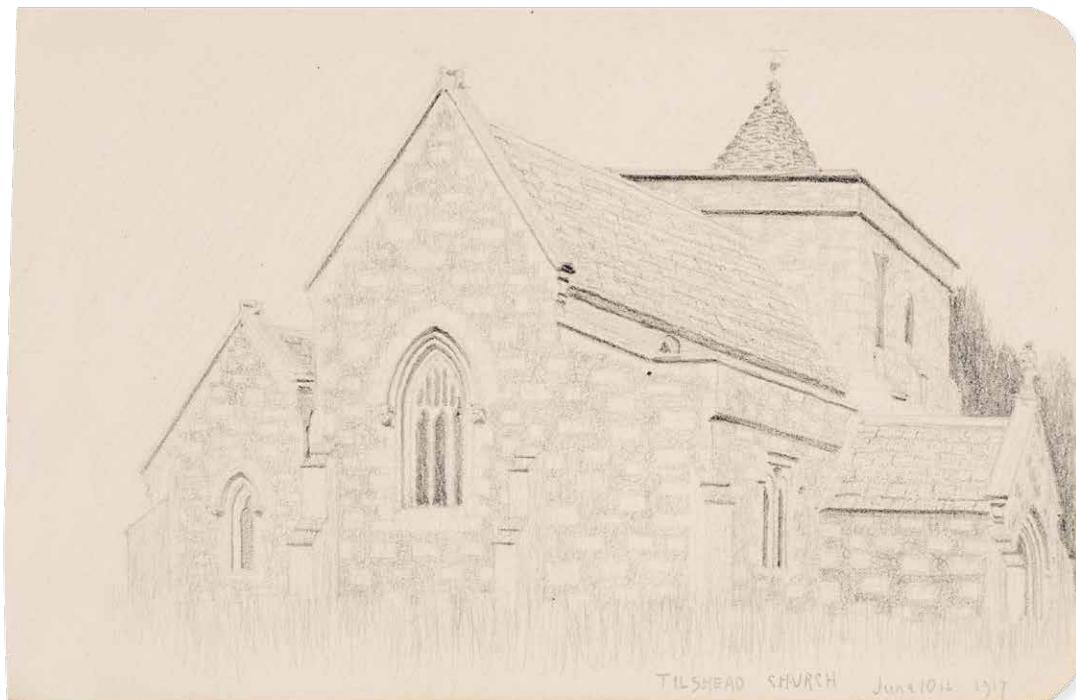
## Sketchbooks and drawings, 1916 to 1919

Enlisting in the AIF took many Australian artists, including Trinick, to countries they probably would not have visited at the time, if not for the war. Camping in England and marching through villages in France exposed John Trinick to new ideas, history, architecture and natural landscape, which he recorded in correspondence to his family on postcards<sup>14</sup> and by drawing.

Two of Trinick's sketchbooks show that he was attracted to the beauty of the architecture he encountered in England. Seventeen loose pages, dated between 7 December 1916 and 10 June 1917, were found within the marbled covers of a sketchbook. These pencil drawings depict church exteriors and interiors, churchyards, memorials and stone buildings, and include a drawing of Stonehenge made on Christmas Eve 1916. It is possible to imagine the artist drawing

while thinking about spending Christmas away from home and family. Perhaps he also reflected on the opportunities presented by being in England, where he was able to observe and draw architectural and spiritual heritage beyond his experience in Australia.

One of the church drawings is *Tilshead Church*, dated 10 June 1917 (below). Built in 1100, the Church of St Thomas à Becket is situated in the village of Tilshead on the Salisbury



John B. Trinick, ... and when he awaked he looked afore him and saw the city of Sarras, c. 1916–19, pencil and ink on paper, 17.5 × 12.5 cm. Accession no. 2013.0324, gift in memory of Ruth Trinick 2013, University of Melbourne Art Collection.



Plain and is ‘completely surrounded by military training land’.<sup>15</sup> This sketch demonstrates Trinick’s range of fine drawing skills and ability to

use shading and intricate lines to capture the essence of an enduring and architecturally beautiful church in a field of long grass, creating a peaceful atmosphere, despite the military activity nearby.

Another drawing found in the marbled-cover sketchbook shows a city perched high on a mountain, watched by a knight in armour (left). It is unique among these loose drawings as it is undated and obviously a work of the imagination. It reflects Trinick’s interest in the legendary search for the Holy Grail. In Arthurian legends, Sarras was a holy city in the spiritual realm. The knight Galahad (son of King Pelle’s daughter) took the Grail to Sarras and upon contemplating it was said to have left the earth ‘in a blaze of ecstasy’.<sup>16</sup> The inscription below the drawing of Sarras comes from Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*<sup>17</sup> and describes Galahad (the figure in the drawing) upon first seeing Sarras: ‘... and when he awaked he looked afore him and saw the city of Sarras’.<sup>18</sup>

This use of symbolism from the legend of the Holy Grail appears to coincide with Trinick’s war service. These interests can also be traced in future works such as a triangular glass panel depicting a white fawn (c. 1950s). This work is held in

the University of Melbourne Art Collection as part of the gift of Harold Trinick in 1997 and, like the drawing of Sarras, bears an inscription taken from a poem, in this case from W.B. Yeats’ *The shadowy waters* (1906):<sup>19</sup> ‘O morning star / Trembling in the blue heavens like a white fawn’.<sup>20</sup> The white fawn symbol is also found in *La morte d’Arthur*, when knights Galahad, Percivale and Bors, who have seen a white hart, are told: ‘And well Our Lord be signified to an hart, for the hart when he is old he waxeth young again in his white skin’.<sup>21</sup>

### Drawings on Australian Red Cross paper

Australian Red Cross was formed as a branch of British Red Cross on 13 August 1914, only nine days after the outbreak of World War I. Australian Red Cross volunteers helped those serving in the war in many ways, including sending care parcels to the sick and wounded.<sup>22</sup> One of these parcels may have contained the Australian Red Cross paper that Trinick used for some of his drawings. Alternatively, Australian Red Cross may have given him the paper when he was in hospital, or when being transported by ambulance, as other paper supplies were scarce. He may also have believed that drawings on this paper would come

John B. Trinick, *Sappho*, 1918, pencil on paper, sheet 16.5 × 22.5 cm; image 14.2 × 10.5 cm. Accession no. 2013.0218, gift in memory of Ruth Trinick 2013, University of Melbourne Art Collection.



to the attention of Australian Red Cross and be sent home to his mother in the event of his being wounded or killed, as the organisation offered a tracing service for families of wounded and dead soldiers.

The intricate pencil drawings on paper stamped with the Australian Red Cross logo and found in Trinick's marbled-cover sketchbook are intriguing. There are four detailed drawings, depicting four women

associated with mysticism, poetry, legend and religion: *Jeanne d'Arc*, *Sappho*, *King Pelle's daughter* and *Mary Magdalene*. Trinick's inscriptions on the backs of *King Pelle's daughter*, *Jeanne d'Arc* and *Sappho* ask for each

drawing to be sent to his mother, Clara (presumably in the event of his death): 'Will finder please send this diary to Mrs C.E. Trinick C/O Mrs [indecipherable] 59 Liddiard St Glenferrie Victoria Australia'. On the back of the finely rendered drawing of Sappho, Trinick made another pencil inscription: 'These five to Mother with love from Jack'. Perhaps Trinick, after surviving the war, gave one drawing to his mother to keep, or perhaps the fifth drawing was lost, leaving only four in the group.

These were remarkable drawings for a son to plan to send to his mother posthumously. We can speculate that he intended them to provide comfort to his mother, counterbalancing bland military correspondence and showing her that he maintained and developed his personal, spiritual and artistic values despite the difficult circumstances of war. During those years, thousands of relatives of servicemen, including Trinick's mother, dreaded a typed letter arriving at their home, as these terse missives brought worrying or tragic news about loved ones. Clara Trinick received two such letters, one on 7 May 1918 saying that Trinick had been wounded, and another on 15 May 1918 saying that he had been 'reported admitted to Reading War Hospital Reading England,

29/4/18, wounded, severe'.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the drawings, disturbing imagery in Trinick's long poem *Dead sanctuary*, published in 1922, suggests that he was deeply affected by the devastation he witnessed in France at the front, but chose not to share this through visual representation. The poem begins:

Night was upon the world.  
I followed, over  
Vast wastes of desolation,  
in the gloom,  
The poisonous track of an  
unearthly flood,—  
Dark, hideous and silent:  
saw it cover  
All forms of flower and tree:  
saw it entomb  
The homes and haunts of men.<sup>24</sup>

The women depicted in the drawings on Australian Red Cross paper foreshadow Trinick's dedication to ecclesiastical stained glass art and design after the war and also reflect his earlier interest in the work of Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist artists.<sup>25</sup> In the 'Introductory note' to *Dead sanctuary*, the Scottish literary critic and classical scholar J.W. Mackail described the influence of Pre-Raphaelite poets on the mystical themes in Trinick's poem, saying 'it must be recognized unhesitatingly as

the embodiment of a direct spiritual experience'.<sup>26</sup> In *Dead sanctuary*, enlightenment and escape from the 'desecration and destruction through / All the world's wasted empires—doomed to hold / Forever in unsleeping memory',<sup>27</sup> come through unity with an archetypal woman figure where life returns to him 'As lamps ashine our bodies were become— / So wrought to manifest the infinite / Deep hidden Life of our most hallowed home'.<sup>28</sup>

Another sketchbook in the collection is bound in khaki cloth, and inscribed inside the front cover with the artist's cipher, *GBT*, combined with the date 1918. Below the cipher, *J.B. Trinick* is underlined and followed by *Private (No 6607) / 23rd Australian Battalion*. This sketchbook contains relatively few drawings: a faint pencil drawing of a female figure, a twig and branch study and three stained glass window designs. In comparison to the 1916–17 drawings, this indicates Trinick's other interest: recording stained glass designs. When enlisting in the AIF, Trinick gave his occupation as 'painter'; perhaps it was his subsequent exposure to the churches and architecture of England and France that drew him towards a career designing stained glass windows for churches.<sup>29</sup>

Another significant effect of war service on Trinick's development as

John B. Trinick, Design for rose window,  
1934, watercolour pigment and ink on paper,  
sheet 26.5 × 26.5 cm. Accession no. 2013.0230,  
gift in memory of Ruth Trinick 2013,  
University of Melbourne Art Collection.



an artist was that he was granted leave in 1919 to attend the Byam Shaw and Vicat Cole School of Art in London.<sup>30</sup> His training there stressed figure drawing, especially the draped figure in the style of the Pre-Raphaelites,<sup>31</sup> and figures such as these would recur frequently in his later designs. One benefit of Trinick's war service was that after returning to London after the war, he was able to regain his place at the school.<sup>32</sup> When he completed his studies in 1920 he was 'commissioned by A.E. Waite to design a set of tarot cards depicting the Great Symbols of the Tarot',<sup>33</sup> which also featured many draped female forms and Christian mystical symbols.

During his career, John Trinick created more than 50 stained glass window schemes and held regular exhibitions at the Royal Academy of Arts; a selection of his stained glass drawings was acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum. He made a substantial contribution to the art of stained glass in England and deserves to be better known in Australia, where he spent his foundation years as an artist.

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