

War Craft

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
24 February – 23 August 2026



France. Third Republic (1871-1940), AR 1 franc, Paris, 1918. Obverse smoothed and engraved 'TO MY / DEAR / MOTHER'. © The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

War Craft, a new free display at The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, explores the human experience of war through objects made, adapted and treasured in moments of conflict. From mementoes of fallen comrades to items created to occupy idle hands, the display reveals stories of ingenuity, hope, survival and loss amid the devastation of war.

Bringing together a wide-ranging selection of objects and artefacts made and kept by soldiers, civilians and prisoners of war, *War Craft* presents deeply personal responses to conflict across centuries and continents. Spanning from the Napoleonic Wars to the ongoing war in Ukraine, the display seeks to humanise the inhumanity of war by foregrounding individual acts of making, remembering and resilience.

At the heart of the display are newly acquired examples of so-called 'trench art' for the Fitzwilliam's collection. Crafted from the materials of warfare, these objects demonstrate how creativity persisted even in the most extreme circumstances.

Highlights include a striking pair of brass shell cases transformed into ornate vases, recently acquired by the Museum. Chinese labourers played a vital logistical role for the Allied forces during the First World War, including clearing battlefields at the end of hostilities. To supplement their income, some created objects for sale. These expertly carved shell cases depict dragons, a symbol of power and prestige in Chinese culture. Their meaning is deepened by the engraving of the Chinese word *píng*, which can mean both 'vase' and 'peace'.

Coins and banknotes – widely available and easy to work – were frequently decorated, defaced or repurposed. Their transformation required no specialist equipment: with a pen, or a nail struck against a hard surface, anyone could create something new. The display features remarkable examples of 20th-century converted coins that reveal intimate connections to conflict. *How's your poor feet* is a rare engraved message sent from Britain to

a loved one serving at the front. *To my dear Mother* was sent home as a souvenir in the later stages of the First World War or following the November 1918 Armistice. A 1921 penny engraved with *Britain Needs You* was probably produced as patriotic propaganda just before or early in the Second World War.

Alongside these objects, *War Craft* features drawings and prints by major artists including J.M.W. Turner, Paul Nash, C.R.W. Nevinson and John Singer Sargent, as well as poetry by Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon, a war hero and leading poet of World War I, gifted a volume of poetry to the Fitzwilliam in 1955, commemorating time spent in Cambridge while stationed there.

Painted around two years after the Battle of Waterloo, Turner's 1817 watercolour and graphite work reconstructs the aftermath of a battle that claimed approximately 40,000 lives. Bodies from both sides lie heaped together in the foreground, blood staining the earth beneath them. In the years following 1815, waves of tourists travelled to Waterloo, many seeking mementoes of the battlefield.

The display also includes drawings and prints by Paul Nash, who served on the Western Front in early 1917 before returning later that year as an official war artist. Deeply affected by his experiences, Nash wrote to his wife: *'I am no longer an artist interested and curious, I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever.'*

Together, the display asks what artworks and objects made in times of war can reveal about the pain, peril and life-changing experiences of conflict, as well as our instinct to seek hope and humanity through creativity and making, even in our darkest moments.

Dr Richard Kelleher, Senior Curator of Medieval and Modern Money at the Fitzwilliam Museum, said: *"The objects in this display, crafted from found materials and battlefield waste, were made by ordinary people caught up in extraordinary circumstances associated with conflict and its consequences. They offer personal and meaningful insights into how soldiers, civilians, and prisoners of war created objects as a way of coping with the stresses of daily life. Making often served to occupy the mind and hands, but it also played an important role in recovery and convalescence for the injured, and in sustaining morale, identity, and hope for prisoners of war living in conditions of uncertainty and confinement."*

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Notes to Editors

Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

Open Tuesday–Saturday, 10am–5pm, Sunday and Bank Holidays 12–5pm

War Craft is on view in Gallery 14, 24 February 2026 – 23 August 2026

This display is free to visit and there's no need to book

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About the Fitzwilliam Museum

The Fitzwilliam Museum is home to one of the world's most remarkable university art collections. We care for works of art and material culture primarily from Europe, North Africa and Asia that connect people across cultures and time. Since 1816 we've been a place for learning and discovery. Today, we use art, objects, spaces and experiences to inspire curiosity, reflection and creativity – opening up the past to transform our futures. As an internationally recognised centre for research and conservation, we work with partners across the world to explore how collections can be better understood, cared for and shared.

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