

An exhibition “ART AT THE FRONT” features selected drawings created by Russian veterans of the Second World War who crossed Europe from Russia to Berlin with a rifle, a pencil and a sketchbook. A mosaic of individual war-time impressions: rare moments of calm between the battles, scenes in hospitals and the most important- portraits of soldiers and people, the artists met on their extensive journeys, some of whom never returned home.

The exhibition draws on family archives of two Russian artists, who witnessed the war as active soldiers: one in the artillery and the other a sapper. Their separate journeys through war have been recorded in sketches, drawings and watercolours. They both joined the Red Army as soon as the war broke out in the Soviet Union on 22nd June 1941, and finished after storming Berlin in the Spring of 1945. Being dedicated artists and having received initial artistic training, they could not help drawing - even through the years of war.

Each created a visual diary of personal impressions of people and places encountered on their extensive passages through various parts of Europe.



Pavel Afonin,
Self-Portrait, 1943

Pavel Ivanovich Afonin (1920-2011) and Sergey Fedorovich Babkov (1920-1993) were twenty years old when they volunteered to join the front in June 1941. Pavel had just completed his 3rd year at the Moscow Architectural Institute; whilst Sergey was a fresh graduate from the Art School of the All-Russian Academy of Arts in Leningrad, when he was preparing to enter the Academy. No one could predict their lives would be changed so drastically overnight.

Soon after joining the frontline in 1942, Lieutenant Babkov started serving as a Firing Platoon Commander of the 7th Battery of the 840th Artillery Regiment. Sergeant Afonin was sent to the Kalinin Front and soon became head of technical intelligence, and subsequently Commander of the 17th Separate Assault Field Engineer Brigade of the 5th Assault Army.

They fought on different fronts and took part in some of the most decisive military operations, including the Battles of Kursk, Leningrad, Vyborg and eventually Berlin. Both suffered serious wounds and concussions, but magically stayed alive.



Sergey Babkov,
Self-Portrait, 1942

They never stopped drawing. Especially during time of recovery in hospitals, they created a series of portraits of young and old, soldiers and sailors, for some of whom these became the last living records.

When the war finished, Captain Pavel Afonin went back to his studies and became an Honoured Architect and Professor. He helped to rebuild destroyed cities and towns of Russia and continued to paint.

Sergey Babkov finished The All-Russian Academy of Arts in Saint- Petersburg (formerly Leningrad), and being deeply moved by his experiences of war, pursued his career as a “battalist” – an artist who specialises in painting battle scenes and historical genre canvases. He worked for over ten years in the Grekov Studio in Saint-Petersburg, where he created many important canvases, based on his wartime drawings, as well as sketches made during his extensive travels on battleships and visits to military sites.

When the artists became acquainted in Saint-Petersburg in the 1960’s, the subject of war was always at the centre of their talks and discussions. They remained good friends and continued painting, often together *en plein air*, and sometimes at places where they had fought not so long ago.



Vyborg district hospital: a sailor of the Baltic Fleet, 23 years old, high-school student-athlete. Before the war he had a son. He died shortly after being discharged from the hospital; his ship hit a mine.

Pavel Afonin

The wounded sailor, pencil on paper, 1944

A student at the Moscow Architectural Institute and author's friend, David died tragically in 1943. Badly wounded on the battlefield, he literally died in front of his comrades, who were unable to crawl up to him because of the intense shelling.



Pavel Afonin

David Khodzhaev, pencil on paper, 1942



Field Surgeon, divisional doctor, he made it all the way to Berlin. He saved many lives. After the war Vakhtang was discharged and returned home to Georgia, where he died shortly after from the complications of severe wounds received in the battle of Berlin.

Pavel Afonin

Vakhtang Kandelaki, watercolour on paper, 1945



The years 1939-1945 became the most tragic in the history of mankind. The Second World War took the lives of over 70 million people and broke the hearts of even more families and friends around the globe.

There are very few surviving witnesses of those tragic days and their visual records become increasingly precious for us, our children and generations to come. It is an important part of our history and heritage, which carries a message of eternal wisdom to humanity: do not let such disasters happen again; try to avoid conflicts, impacting lives of others; actively seek understanding and foster mutual respect and peace between people and nations.

The art of the Second World War informs, educates, inspires, and consequently encourages us to take more considered thought about who we are and how we impact the world we live in.

Let it talk to our hearts!



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To mark the 68th Anniversary of the end of the Second World War and in memory of all who lost their lives in the world's largest and deadliest conflict

ART AT THE FRONT

Second World War drawings by Russian artists-soldiers

10-20th May 2013

Jesus College Chapel

Jesus College, Cambridge, CB5 8BL

Mon-Sat: 10am-4pm, 7.30pm-10pm, Sun: 11am-3pm

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