**Kennington, Eric Henri (1888-1960)**

Eric Kennington’s career began in 1908 and, by early 1914, had gained critical success with his portrait commissions and pictures of London Costers. However, it is his war paintings and war memorials for which he is best known, among them the large oil-painting on glass, *The Kensingtons at Laventie: Winter 1914* (1916), as well as further paintings and drawings as an official war artist from 1917-19. Influenced by the ‘direct carving’ techniques of Jacob Epstein, Eric Gill and Frank Dobson, among others, Kennington turned increasingly to sculpture during the post-war years, producing memorials to, for example, the 24th Infantry Division in Battersea Park (c.1922-24), as well as commissions for architectural sculpture. Another important figure in Kennington’s post-war career was T.E. Lawrence, for whose book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (subscribers’ edition, 1926) he drew a series of Arab portraits. He also produced a portrait bust of Lawrence (1926) and a tomb effigy (1935). During the Second World War he was again engaged as an official (and subsequently unofficial) war artist, before turning increasingly to ecclesiastical sculpture after 1946. By the time he died in 1960 his reputation was sadly diminished as a younger generation of sculptors, employing a broadly abstract style and modern materials, took over.

Eric Kennington was born in Victoria Grove, Kensington in 1888 to an artistic family, his father being the moderately successful portraitist and genre painter Benjamin Kennington (1856-1916). From 1906-1908 Kennington attended Lambeth School of Art where he studied alongside Glyn Philpott. His reputation was established with the exhibition of *The Costardmongers* (1914), a detailed scene of London street sellers painted with meticulous realism which was purchased by William Nicholson. At the outbreak of war in 1914, Kennington enlisted as a Private with the 13th Battalion of the London Regiment (known as The Kensingtons) and saw active service on the Western Front. Invalided out of the army in 1915 he painted *The Kensingtons at Laventie: Winter 1914* which was exhibited to great acclaim at the Goupil Gallery in 1916. The picture was striking both for its complex technique, painted in oil with gold leaf on the reverse side of a large pane of glass, and for the frankness and authenticity of its subject matter. The artist and his platoon are depicted on their way down from the trenches, exhausted and frozen; this mundane moment is given powerful monumentality by the rich effects of the medium.

Following this success, Kennington was employed as an official war artist by the Ministry of Information in 1917, and for the Canadian War Records Scheme in 1918-19. As such, he produced charcoal and pastel portraits of rank and file soldiers and scenes of everyday life for these men in the trenches, shown at the Leicester Galleries in 1918. Kennington first exhibited his sculpture at the Alpine Club in 1920 and from this point on sculpture gradually became the primary focus of his output. His first major public sculpture commission was the 24th Infantry Division Memorial which was unveiled in Battersea Park in October 1924. Using the ‘direct carving’ approach of modernist sculptors such as Epstein or Brancusi, the Memorial was carved in stone with a very smooth finish that echoed the effect he strove for in his paintings on glass, and a figural simplicity that would become characteristic of his work. In 1925, he won a similar commission for a *Memorial to the missing of the Battles of the Marne and the Aisne, 1918* (1927-8) at Soissons, where the group of three soldiers carved in stone were even more extreme in their stark, passive solidity, with the monolithic severity of the Easter Island figures seen at the British Museum.

Kennington’s rigorously simplified sculptural aesthetic can also be seen in more personal works such as *The Male Child* (1929), while the strong influence of primitive cultures, from ancient Chinese to Mayan, is exemplified in *War God* (c.1932-3). By 1930, Kennington was identified by critics as an ‘English Modernist’ alongside Dobson, Epstein and Henry Moore, and had become involved in various architectural projects. In 1929-32, for instance, he carved a series of five low-relief panels, representing the ‘emotions’ in Shakespeare’s dramas, directly onto the brick façade of the new Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon. Some of these displayed the artist’s engagement with Medieval sculpture, which became increasingly overt in the 1930s. This interest was fully realised following the sudden death of T.E. Lawrence – who had supported and encouraged Kennington since 1920 – in 1935. Kennington now proposed that he should carve a life-size, recumbent effigy of Lawrence, which was completed in 1939 in St. Martin’s Church, Wareham.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Kennington began working for the War Artists’ Advisory Committee; he was attached to the RAF from 1940-2, drawing portraits of pilots in pastel. From 1946, he focused his energy on ecclesiastical sculpture – such as the *Partridge Memorial* (1946-8) in St. Stephen’s Church, Hammerwood, West Sussex, and the *Cumming Memorial Font* (1949-51) at St. Michael’s Church, Betchworth, Surrey – though continuing to undertake secular public commissions too, including a relief for the new Glasgow University Electrical Engineering Block (1957-9). He married Celandine Hanbury-Tracy (née Cecil) in 1922, and died in 1960 in Reading, Berkshire.

**References and further reading**

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**Images**:

1. ‘The Kensingtons at Laventie’ (1915), oil on glass, 139.7 x 152.4cm, London: The Imperial War Museum. (<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/15145> )

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1. War Memorial for the 24th London Division, Battersea Park (1924), stone (<http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/2322635> )

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