

Known as the Great War because of its unprecedented scale, World War I began after a Serbian nationalist assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, in 1914. Alliances gradually drew all the major European powers into the war, and then it spread around the globe. The United States remained neutral until April 6, 1917, when it joined forces with the Allies (Britain, France, Italy, Serbia, and Russia) fighting against Austria-Hungary and Germany. The American military proved decisive in helping the Allies win the conflict. Peace came on November 11, 1918.

The US government waged an impressive propaganda campaign to raise money and troops for the war. The most famous World War I poster—James Montgomery Flagg's *I Want YOU for U.S. Army, Nearest Recruiting Station* (centerfold)—commands American men to enlist and fight. Uncle Sam's unrelenting posture, gaze, and gesture communicate the inescapability of the draft. Four million copies of the iconic red, white, and blue poster were produced by the government's Division of Pictorial Publicity in 1917 alone. Plastered on the walls of factories, post offices, schools, and shops, *I Want YOU* and other war posters were ubiquitous. The United States issued more propaganda posters than all the other nations at war combined.

Thirty years old in 1917, artist Claggett Wilson volunteered for the Marines and was one of more than two million American men sent to fight in Europe. In the summer of 1918, he was gassed and wounded in the month-long Battle of Belleau Wood. Afterward, Wilson recalled his experiences in brilliant watercolors, twelve of which are in this exhibition. Like the narrator

imed to coincide with the centenary of the United States' entry into the First World War, this exhibition takes an expansive look at America's wartime visual culture through the works of more than seventy artists, including George Bellows, Marsden Hartley, Childe Hassam, Jane Peterson, Horace Pippin, John Singer Sargent, and Edward Steichen. Drawings, films, magazine illustrations, newspaper cartoons, notebooks, paintings, photographs, posters, prints, and sculptures gathered together from sixty public and private collections, including the Imperial War Museums in London, tell the multifaceted story of World War I and American art. Contemporary works by Debra Pridly and Mary Reid Kelley attest to the continued relevance of the war today.

WORLD WAR I AND AMERICAN ART

INGRAM GALLERY
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With these and many other works of art, this exhibition provides the opportunity to look back one hundred years later at the First World War, take stock of its incredible magnitude, and see the international conflict with the passion and sensitivity of American artists who lived through it.

Tritita Kennedy
Curator

in the German World War I novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the artist communicates the brutal realities of modern warfare. In *Dance of Death* (fig. 1), the painter, looking out at the world from the trenches, depicts three German soldiers who had bravely charged across no-man's-land to fight, only to lose their lives after up in barbed wire—a new low-tech weapon. Because it was too risky to retrieve the corpses while the battle continued, they suffered the indignity of being left to hang on the "devil's rope," as barbed wire was called during the war. For the scene, Wilson revives the *Dance of Death* motif first used in Western art centuries earlier, at the time of the Black Death, which similarly devastated millions of lives in Europe. Wilson's choice of medium is also meaningful. Prior to the war, watercolor had become a quintessential American art form and was employed for light and cheery subject matter—the pleasures of sight. The war, however, prompted Wilson and many other artists in this exhibition, including Ivan Albright and Georgia O'Keeffe, to use watercolor's immediacy and intensity to portray the grim themes of exploding bombs, traumatized soldiers, maimed bodies, and death.



Fig. 1

CENTERFOLD: James Montgomery Flagg (1877-1960), *I Want YOU for U.S. Army, Nearest Recruiting Station*, 1917. Poster, 40 x 29 1/2 in. Collection of Wallon Rawls. Photo: The Library Company of Philadelphia. FIGURE 1: Claggett Wilson (1887-1952). *Dance of Death*, ca. 1919. Watercolor and pencil on paperboard, 16 3/4 x 22 1/2 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Alice H. Rossin, 1981.1.63.12. Photo: Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC/Art Resource, NY

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JAMES MONTGOMERY FLAGG

I WANT YOU FOR U.S. ARMY

NEAREST RECRUITING STATION