



No. 14 "The Gas Mask" [From 'The Great War: Britain's Efforts And Ideals shown in a series of lithographic prints: 'Making Soldiers' series]

Date

1917

Primary Maker

Eric Kennington

Medium

Lithograph on paper

Dimensions

50.7 x 40.6 cm

Description

This is a planographic print (lithograph) on paper, and is part of a series entitled 'The Great War: Britain's Efforts And Ideals shown in a series of lithographic prints: 'Making Soldiers' series. There are a total of six lithographs in this particular series, and in total there are ten series. The lithographs are numbered as if the entire ten series are one, so this print is number 14. This appears to be a view from the trenches, with a soldier facing the viewer in the foreground, in shadow, about to put on a gas mask. Behind him other soldiers are putting on gas masks. In 1914, Kennington enlisted with the Kensingtons, the 13th London Regiment. He fought in northern France where he was wounded and sent home in June 1915. All six prints here are presented in monochrome and have a hand-drawn quality with particular attention shown to light and shade. The Gas Mask shows a scene in the trenches as a soldier, bathed in shadow, dons a gas mask. He appears contemplative, aside from his comrades who are grouped in the background, helping each other to secure their masks. Kennington was chiefly concerned with the lives of the men and his focus was on conveying the soldiers in their daily employments. Because of his civilian status, he was confined to camps where, without rank or uniform he saw little of the front line. This seems to have suited Kennington who had a passion for portraying the ordinary soldier. He wrote: "If I am of use, it is in depicting British soldiers in their truest and noblest aspect; of that work I shall never tire."¹⁵ It was a source of frustration for Kennington that many of his and other war artist's work were subject to the censorship of the Department of Information, who wanted to preserve modest anonymity with regard to the ordinary soldier. He produced many pastel portraits of the men, signed by their subjects, only to have the signatures removed later by censors. For each print in Making Soldiers, Kennington has chosen a central figure, placing him in the foreground. Despite this composition, the soldier remains anonymous as the artist carves out his character through his posture and

the details of his uniform, often obscuring his facial features. Kennington shows great sensitivity to the treatment of textiles, allowing the clothes to make the man. Into the Trenches is rich in detail as it shows a soldier running through the dugout. The contrasting areas of light and shadow emphasize different elements of the scene, with light falling on his gun and shadow rendering his face indistinct. Each depicting a different exercise or manoeuvre, the prints are titled concisely, with an economy of words.

Ruth Keating 2014