

MILLER BRITTAIN

When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears

TOM SMART

with an essay by ALLEN BENTLEY

GOOSE LANE EDITIONS

BEAVERBROOK ART GALLERY

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On the cover: All works by Miller Brittain
Background: Detail from *Self-Portrait* (p. 21). Detail images from left to right: *Longshoremen Off Work* (p. 61);
6th panel *Sketches for Saint John Tuberculosis Hospital* (p. 81); *Night Target, Germany* (p. 97);
At the Foot of the Cross (p. 110); *Fused Nudes II* (p. 131); *Woman's Head* (p. 139); *The Red Men* (p. 124).
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It must have seemed to Miller Brittain that he was lying in the belly of a black archangel as the bomber lumbered over the river valley. Bathed in moonlight, the view below sparkled with thousands of dazzling jewels, exploded from fire. He knew that he had helped create this scene. A dream and two decades later, in a sprawling house on the bank of the St. John River, gazing at his paper, he drew traces of this apocalypse in the eyes of a child, in long-stemmed flowers, and in slender-limbed figures. Through hell there is a clear path, and he, like Blake, was taking it, recording the way as only the artist could.

Writers on Miller Brittain's art have frequently described the asymmetry of his genius. His work has been regarded as uneven, passing through many changes over the years and ending up as a mix of images showing that he may have lost his mind. As a consequence, two interpretations have emerged. One holds that, at the height of his creative power before the Second World War Brittain was a "social realist," and his post-war visions, incorporating biblical and esoteric imagery, betray a loosening grip on reality. Another maintains that Brittain was an ultra-subjective surrealist whose later work, in particular, involuntarily reflects his moods and spiritual geography — variations of ecstatic self-absorption.

When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears offers a different explanation of Miller Brittain's art. As a student in New York in the early 1930s, Brittain was extremely well trained. Just as he was attempting to establish an artistic identity, the Depression drew him, as it drew many his age, back to the point from which he started his quest for independence: home. His attempt to break free of enclosed east-coast Canadian propriety and morality was aborted. Nevertheless, by the end of the decade, he had developed a very promising career; well known

Miller Brittain, c. 1950
Murray Barnard Collection



regionally and praised by important national critics, he was a rising star in the Canadian art world. His trajectory was interrupted when, in 1942, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force; he spent two years in training and on active service as a bomb aimer and two more years as an Official War Artist.

In the RCAF, Brittain found self-definition in the company of anxiety, fear, and death. When he returned home, he resumed his search for artistic and personal identity, developing styles and themes that took him to new levels of achievement and recognition in Canada and the United States. A recurring motif entered his expressive vocabulary at the end of the war: the star and spear. First used to describe aircraft falling from the sky, it came to represent flowers and stems, heads and necks, sunbursts and smoke, and eventually, driven at least in part by alcohol, sanity and insanity.

By the late 1940s, Brittain had become creatively self-aware, and 1949 was a watershed year, the highest point in his career so far. His first important solo exhibition, a retrospective, began in January at the New Brunswick Museum; in the late spring, works included in an exhibition in Dayton, Ohio, received glowing praise in *Saturday Night*, which raised his Canadian profile significantly; these successes led to his first solo show in New York in 1950.

For the opening of the New Brunswick Museum exhibition, Brittain wrote and delivered a public lecture called “My Aims as an Artist.” Part of this speech was published in *Northern Review*, probably the most important Canadian journal of the arts at that time.¹ In his early work, he said,

I concerned myself with expressing in pictures what presented itself to my eye. The means at the disposal of any artist are line, mass, and colour, and it was my task to manipulate these within a given space in as stimulating a manner as was possible for me.

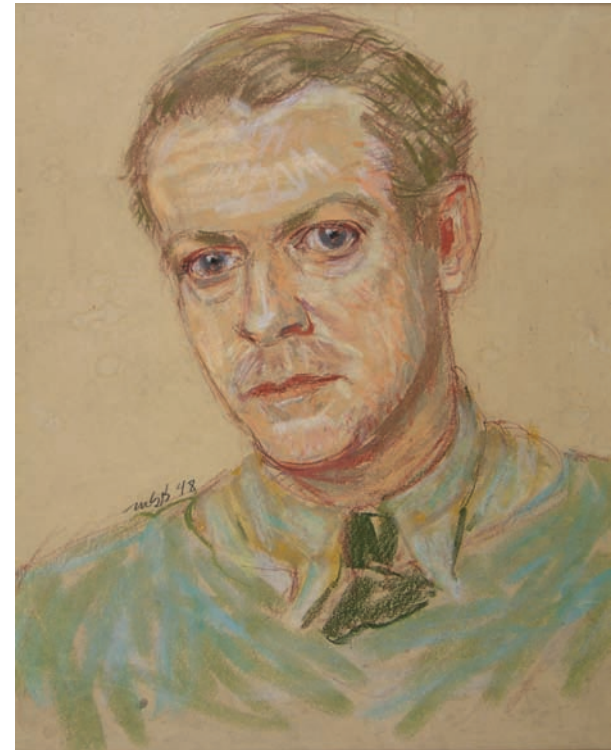
Succinctly and prophetically, this statement defines Brittain’s art in all its phases, early and late. He began and remained primarily a superb draughtsman, an artist moving confidently and deftly within the world defined by materials and the rules of making a picture.

Brittain understood that before a picture became loaded with a social message or transformed into an ecstatic vision, its inner workings must obey strict compositional and technical

rules. The visual architecture of a Brittain image is never overstated, but it is nonetheless present as the platform on which colour, light, line, space, and texture describe his subjects — newsboys and longshoremen, airmen, prophets, anthropomorphic beings, and abstracted, organic forms — whether they presented themselves to his eyes or whether he dredged them up from memory or the depths of his unconscious. Each image, real and surreal, is grounded in an artistic logic that became instinctive when Brittain was a young art student. The lessons he learned then defined his manner of visual thinking and gave each of his images the coherence that makes them intelligible, even when they express religious ecstasy, hysteria, hallucination, or mystical communion.

Brittain remained a figurative artist at a time when abstraction was becoming dominant. He based his artistic intentions in empathy. By feeling with the characters of his subjects, he created easily read and intuitively understood situations that drew the sympathy of the viewer. To represent an entire character, establishing a sympathetic rapport between spectator and subject, he paid attention to rendering gestures, expressing a whole life in a simple turn of hand, bend of neck, or posture. He said that, before the war, “I desired to use no other material than that which confronted me on every side,” concentrating on the externals: “the textures of surfaces, the differences of such things as hair, flesh, and cloth.” Seeking to describe “the behaviour of clothes when covering the human figure,” he gave clothing an emblematic dimension; through the fold of fabric, its drape and wrinkle, and “the effect on different fabrics when the figure was in motion” he revealed “how clothes long worn become identified inescapably with the character of the person wearing them.” Thus he made gesture disclose character. When his project was to expose the “absurdity of human antics,” he used satire and irony to great effect, combining a guilty conscience, a sensitive eye, a sharp understanding of human frailty, and a degree of pathos to cut to the core of human emotions. In essence, the structure of Brittain’s pictures is balanced by the humanity of his interpretation. Compositionally, the abstract and the human coexist, and the degree to which one or the other dominates establishes a keen tension in each work.

Until 1946, Brittain’s subjects had involved groups of men and women in social situations, but, he said, after the war, “While I was still interested in their outward appearance, I was perhaps even more concerned with their psychological makeup.” He interpreted biblical themes, dissected human relationships, attempted to face apocalypse, or explored the mystical fusion of two beings into one. He cast his imagination into territories of the unconscious,



Self Portrait, 1948
Pastel over brown-red pencil on wove paper
42.2 x 35.2 cm
New Brunswick Museum A69.34

where he searched the unexpected and probed the inaccessible. Tragically for himself, to a large degree he was successful. Inevitably, he said, as he focused on the emotional and spiritual realms of the unconscious:

This led me to ponder on the problems of good and evil. I contemplated the inner conflict that is part of Everyman and tried to incorporate into my work such abstract qualities as love, despair, terror, and so on, since they are the inevitable experience of Everyman, and I felt they should be faced and dealt with rather than shrunk from.

As he explored “love, despair, terror, and so on,” Brittain faced these same emotions in himself; by claiming to speak for Everyman, he sought to heal, or at least set aside, his own trauma. “If the artist feels despair and makes a picture of it,” he said, “it means he has faced his despair and turned it into a work of art, which is or should be a labour of love, and his mind is purged of despair.”

Brittain’s artistic purpose after the war was to make formal pictorial elements function psychologically in the same way they had functioned narratively before the war:

Line, mass, and colour are still my tools, but there is an increased variety of ways they may be used as my experience grows and my perception deepens. I am trying to make line, mass, and colour function psychologically. I desire that they intensify the expression of *emotion* implicit in the picture rather than have them emphasize the character of the *things* involved.

For Brittain, art, humanity, and psychology were never estranged. He saw the modernist trend of separating form from subject as an aberration, and pure formalism, divorced from a human subject, was, he felt, “obscene.”

It is impossible for man to imagine or visualize any form higher than man, so that in my own case, while almost every picture I make starts as an arrangement of shapes and colours, it must ultimately come to terms with the visible world and man’s experience.