



*Drawing the  
Home Front*



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Eleanor Erlund Hudson



*Fellow artist sketching, 1940*

## Eleanor Erlund Hudson



1912 - 2011



- 1912 Born St Marychurch, Devon
- 1931-34 Attended Torbay School of Art
- 1935-37 Attended Royal College of Art
- 1938 Awarded Travelling Scholarship to Rome
- 1938 Elected Associate of Royal Society of Painter Etchers & Engravers (R.E.)
- 1938 Exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada
- 1939 Elected Associate of Royal Watercolour Society (R.W.S.)
- 1939 Returned to England after outbreak of war, narrowly escaping internment in Italy
- 1940 Exhibited at Royal Academy for the first time
- 1941 Six works acquired by the War Artists Advisory Committee (W.A.A.C.)
- 1941 War work exhibited at National Gallery
- 1946 Elected member of the R.E
- 1947 Chosen to participate in British Council Travelling Exhibition
- 1949 Elected member of the R.W.S (one of only five female member at the time)
- 1954 Met Nesta Brooking & began extensive recording of ballet subjects
- 2009 Exhibited at Women War Artists at Imperial War Museum, aged 97
- 2011 Died, London.

Eleanor Erlund Hudson, who died earlier this year at the age of 99, was one of the most notable members of a small group of women artists who produced a remarkable body of work during the Second World War.

The sensitivity and emotional power of these images still resonates today – to mark the occasion of Eleanor's death, the Telegraph, Guardian, Times and Independent all carried full-page obituaries.

The work produced by female artists in World War Two generally depicted a world far removed from the front line but was nonetheless inspired by the national war effort: a world of convalescent homes, sewing groups, NAAFI canteens and making do and mending. Of all female war artists, Hudson's work is perhaps the furthest removed from the activity of war itself, partly because of inclination: "I painted life, not death", she recalled later in life, but also because a childhood spinal injury meant that she was prevented from joining up or from engaging in heavy war work.

It could easily have been a very different story. At the outbreak of war, Eleanor (Erlund was a family name reflecting Norwegian ancestry) was in Italy on a travelling scholarship awarded by the Royal College of Art. Photographs of the trip show an impishly stylish young woman clearly having the time of her life – an enjoyment reflected in surviving examples of her work from this time. There is no sense whatsoever of the political stormclouds hanging over the continent. When war was declared, Hudson only very narrowly escaped internment by the Italian authorities. In fact, it was only the 'kind concern' of an Italian officer, whom she met in the Dolomites, that encouraged Eleanor to pack her bags and return to England.



Whisked away from impending war in Europe, the 26 year old R.C.A. graduate found herself evacuated to rural Leicestershire, where she stayed with her brother – a vicar – and his young family. The sedate rural parish of Ashby Magna

was a world away from art college and the glamour of her international travels, but one which she set about recording with her characteristically keen eye: "This was a kind of war work but was basically for my own interest and pleasure". The drawings, watercolours & etchings she produced at this time – some of which are exhibited here – display a technical proficiency and a maturity of observation and handling that belie her years.

In one stunning drawing (*front cover illustration*), a group of plump middle-aged rural women appear to be festooning a barn with bunting. In fact, they are drying herbs on washing lines to be used in the making of balms for wounded servicemen. Their unlikely grace and sense of purposeful enjoyment is captured with a masterful economy of detail.

Images like these were demonstrably the work of an artist of considerable talent, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the artistic establishment. In 1939, the same year she returned to England, the Royal Watercolour Society made Eleanor Hudson an associate member – quite an accolade, given that this distinguished society had just three female members at the time: Dame Laura Knight, Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale and Minnie Smythe. The Society of Painter-Etchers & Engravers (R.E.) had already officially recognised her talent the previous year.

Kenneth Clark and the War Artists Advisory Committee (W.A.A.C.) were also impressed with the selection of watercolours and drawings that Eleanor submitted – at the behest of her tutor and mentor at the Royal College of Art, the distinguished artist, Robert Austin. They acquired six pieces, including 'Village Women Drying Wild Herbs' and 'Forces Canteen Kitchen', all of which were exhibited at the National Gallery.



*At the RCA, 1938*

The influence of Austin, a brilliant, old-fashioned draughtsman whose work is reminiscent more of Old Masters such as Dürer than contemporary figures like Picasso, can clearly be traced in Hudson's work, where the close observation of detail has a transcendent, almost devotional quality. In one quietly beautiful drawing, a pair of unmade dormitory beds have their moment of glory, a scene that had meaning for Hudson, who remembered the work of nurses as being "snarled up in miles and miles of sheeting."

It had been a rapid rise to the top for the country girl from rural Devon. Less than five years before, she had seemed destined to bloom unseen, after finishing her studies at the deeply provincial Torquay School of Art, where female life models were required to wear bathing suits to preserve their modesty. On completion of her course and reluctant to accept that her studies were complete, Eleanor abandoned protocol and doorstepped the offices of Sir William Rothenstein, the distinguished principal of the Royal College. Rothenstein was so taken with her cheek and amused with the bathing suited portfolio that he gave her an ex gratia place.



*'A Clean Shirt' - a wartime still life*

Surviving examples of her work at the R.C.A. show a pronounced affinity for portraiture and the life class. This talent ripened in the wartime period, when the straitened and difficult circumstances of the time add an emotional piquancy to the work.

It is mostly the ordinary, domestic life of women that she recorded: girls huddled in bare rooms, nursing cups of tea, overcoats hung over their shoulders. But there is suffering too. One particularly affecting portrait (inside back cover, top right) perfectly captures the pensive faraway look of displacement – in this case a refugee called Bella, who had been a lawyer in her native Czechoslovakia but was forced to flee from the Nazis. An inscription, added later, records that she returned to her country after the war – and was eventually arrested and shot for resisting the Soviet communist regime.

A very long lifetime later, in 2007, the wartime work was exhibited again by the Imperial War Museum and Eleanor, now aged 97, was invited to see it, fielding interviews from the national press and Radio 4's 'Woman's Hour'. She recalled her experiences in her characteristically matter of fact way: "I never thought of not drawing every spare minute. Whatever happened, I drew it."

*Andrew Sim, 2011*



*Voluntary war work, Leicestershire 1940*



*Girl studying drawing. 1930s*



*Make do & Mend, 1940*



*Cart horses, Wales 1941*



*Comfort!*



*Relaxation*



*Women drying herbs for wartime medicinal use in the Parish Hall, Ashby Magna*

***"I never thought of not drawing every spare minute. Whatever happened, I drew it."***



*A cup of tea and some gossip*



*A wartime siesta*



*Three village women sorting medicinal herbs*



*A Park in Rome, 1939*



*A Norfolk Landscape, 1943*



*Carts in a Welsh barn, 1941*



*Sorting herbs*



*Haymaking, Abergavenny, 1941*

**Eleanor Hudson's work can be found in the collections of the following museums:**

- British Museum
- Imperial War Museum
- The Wellcome Collection
- National Gallery of Canada
- Yale Center for British Art
- Dudley Art Gallery
- Brighton Museum & Art Gallery

## *Women in wartime*



*With thanks to: Alan Hudson and Eleanor Garcia*

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