

OSBORNE SAMUEL

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

CHRISTOPHER NEVINSON (1889-1946)



Destroyed Canal, Ytres, 1918

Oil on Canvas

61 x 46 cms

(23.97 x 18.08 in)

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Signed & dated lower left

Though signed and dated 1918 this unpeopled landscape was, according to the artist, started in France the previous year. After serving in the Royal Army Medical Corps Nevinson in 1917 became a Ministry of Information War Artist and spent time near the north-eastern France battlefields. In July 1917, for example, Nevinson was sketching the quagmire conditions and sites of carnage here and, before returning to London in early August 1917, witnessed the start of the disastrous Passchendaele campaign. Sketches were worked up back in London resulting in the powerful 'After a Push'.

The Slade-trained and well-connected Nevinson was a tersely outspoken and ambitious artist who both jealously guarded his artistic independence and integrity of vision and courted fame, publicity and recognition. His own early modern credentials – and with it a thrustingly graphic mechanical style – were sown early, Nevinson having fraternised with the Futurist leader Marinetti before the war, exhibited with the Vorticists and co-founded the London Group. Like his colleague Paul Nash, Nevinson portrayed the war without sentimentality*1 using a predominantly graphic approach. This graphic decisiveness is seen in drypoints and lithographs of the war and, during its aftermath, of New York City.

Despite its rustic tranquillity and plein air clarity 'Destroyed Canal' suggests the recent traumas of the Great War. The composition's implicitly forceful perspectival lines are a subliminal reminder of the artist's best war work. Devoid of people and describing the residual topographic ravishes of war, 'Destroyed Canal' has both a haunting emptiness and the salutary promise of natural regeneration. Despite sharing the central receding channel of Nevinson's lithograph 'The Road from Arras to Bapaume' (1918) the oil painting, unlike the print, breathes with an almost post-impressionist palette.

'Destroyed Canal' was exhibited soon after its completion at the artist's sell-out Leicester Galleries show in March 1918. This followed Nevinson's equally successful maiden solo there in 1916. The plaudits in the press and commercial inroads were offset by a belligerent Nevinson's ongoing feuds with first military then art establishment. The 'Times' critic called 'Destroyed Canal' the best picture in the exhibition the most like Van Gogh.*2 While sharing here the Dutch master's naturalistic colour and Low Countries rusticity 'Destroyed Canal' equally anticipates L.S. Lowry's lonely landscape vision with rigid compositional dividers and reduced surface organisation. The canal site is about 8 miles south east of Bapaume.

1.	 Preface 'Nash and Nevinson in War and peace' The Leicester Galleries. Nov 1977.

2.	'The Times' 4/3/18. p.4