

## Steve McQueen Queen and Country 2007



### Key facts:

Installation: Wooden stamp cabinet on metal legs with 120 double-sided wooden sliders in which are displayed 136 prints in the form of 155 sheets of stamps featuring portrait photograph images of British military personnel who died on active service in Iraq.

Date: 2007

Size: Support: Depth 1400 mm, Height 1900 mm, Width 2600 mm

Materials: wood, metal , paper, perspex

Location: Imperial War Museum of the North

### ***IWM North catalogue entry***

*Queen and Country* is a 2007 artwork by British artist Steve McQueen. The work is a set of 155 sheets of stamps, each sheet commemorating a soldier who was killed in the Iraq War between 2003 and 2008. The work was a co-commission between the Manchester International Festival and the Imperial War Museum.

McQueen was commissioned, under the official war artists' programme at the Imperial War Museum, to produce a work of art about the British Armed Forces in the Iraq war. In 2006 he travelled to Basra where he spent six days embedded with British troops. Initially he planned to produce a film about the troops he witnessed serving in Iraq but was frustrated by the restrictions on movement placed on him. He approached the US armed forces to work with them but that fell through.

Later at his home in Amsterdam, McQueen was posting his tax return when he noticed the stamp on the envelope had a portrait of Vincent van Gogh. The idea of using a stamp came to him: "a stamp has a beautiful scale, the proportions are right, the image, it is recognisable, and then it goes out into the world, who knows where. Perfect. Wonderful" McQueen said.

When McQueen suggested it to the Ministry of Defence they were lukewarm about the idea, suggesting that McQueen do a landscape instead. The MOD would not supply photos of the deceased, so McQueen used a researcher to contact the families of those who had lost loved ones in Iraq and request an image of their loved ones. McQueen initially contacted 115 families, 98 agreed and 4 refused.

He created an oak cabinet containing a series of facsimile postage sheets which are mounted on 120 double-sided vertical panels, which can be withdrawn for viewing. Each sheet shows multiple portrait heads, each one dedicated to a deceased soldier, with details of name, regiment, age and date of death printed in the margin. The cabinet is ordered in chronological order from the four Royal Marines and three members of the Royal Regiment of Artillery who died on 21 March 2003, to Sergeant "Baz" Barwood of the RAF, who was killed on 29 February 2008.

***The Daily Telegraph website 4:40PM GMT 10 Nov 2008. Accessed 05 Jun 2017.***

**A remarkable piece of art commemorating our Iraq war dead deserves wider circulation, says Sarah Crompton.**

A postage stamp is such a simple thing. Yet this little scrap of paper has always been worth more than the humble materials from which it is made. If it is rare enough, it can fetch millions. And its value stretches even beyond that: the stamp continues to symbolise the power of communication.

A year ago, in a stroke of brilliance, artist Steve McQueen came up with the idea of producing a set of stamps to commemorate the British men and women who had lost their lives in Iraq - and making them available across the world, by persuading the Royal Mail to produce them. But on Remembrance Day it is a cause for sadness that this simple, striking notion has still not been achieved a year after it was suggested.

The story starts when McQueen, one of Britain's brightest artistic talents, was made official war artist by the Imperial War Museum in 2006. He went to Iraq for six frustrating days, but

the deteriorating security situation in Basra meant that he couldn't go anywhere or see anything. He returned hugely impressed by the soldiers he had encountered, but without any idea of how to make a work of art out of his experience.

McQueen is best known as a filmmaker. His first feature film, *Hunger*, about Bobby Sands and the IRA hunger strikers, has just been released to critical acclaim. In 1999, he won the Turner Prize for a film in which he pushed an oil drum through New York, and a short celebrating the work of Buster Keaton.

He didn't have enough material from his trip to Iraq to make a film, but he was determined to continue with the project. Then one day he stuck a stamp on his tax return; because he lives in Amsterdam, the face on the front was that of Vincent Van Gogh. McQueen had his inspiration: a stamp is a portrait, perfect in scale, and omnipresent in the world.

From that initial idea, *Queen and Country* developed. In its gallery form, it takes the shape of a solid wooden box, with what look like grooves set down its sides. If you slip your fingers in, a tray slides out - and there, behind glass, is a sheet of postage stamps. Printed on each stamp is a young, unfamiliar face: that of a British soldier, in a photograph chosen by their family. Each is identified by name, regiment, age and date of death, printed down the border of the sheet.

It is an astonishingly powerful piece. When I first saw it at the Imperial War Museum, I was struck by the way in which some sheets of glass were left empty - as if space had been set aside for the casualties yet to come. In the intervening year, those vacancies have been filled. A piece of art that once commemorated the deaths of 98 young people now marks the loss of 136, out of the 156 who died up to June 2007. Twenty families have declined to take part; 20 more families who have since suffered bereavements are now being approached.

But the piece, which has toured to art galleries around the country this year, and goes to Scotland next month, was only ever part of the work. It was always McQueen's intention that the stamps would be printed by the Royal Mail and would be used. "This is all about remembering and acknowledgement," he told me. "The whole idea was to make a statement that everyone could participate in."

His campaign has been backed by the considerable power of the Art Fund, who have launched a petition. Gordon Brown is said to be giving the idea consideration. But the Royal Mail has prevaricated, saying the role and sacrifice of the UK's servicemen and women already feature in its special stamps programme every year (see box, above).

"Royal Mail receives around 3,000 requests every year for special stamp issues, but only 10 subjects can be chosen," reads their statement. "Therefore it is impossible to accommodate every request." Yet this somehow misses the point.

Such reluctance is all the more depressing, given the subtlety and power of the piece McQueen has produced. Works of art about war fall broadly into three categories. There are the protest pieces, of which Picasso's *Guernica* is probably the most famous example. Then there are works which describe war and its effects: Stanley Spencer's murals of shipbuilders, for instance, were commissioned by the government to record the experiences of the Second World War.

The walls of the Imperial War Museum are full of the third category: regimental and battle paintings which romanticise valour and sanitise suffering.

McQueen's extraordinary achievement in *Queen and Country* is to unite in one work all three categories: because the stamps are photographs of real people, it is a depiction of what is happening; because they speak of loss, it becomes a powerful talisman of the waste of war; and because its subjects are depicted as military men and women, it is a celebration of service and sacrifice.

Thus, *Queen and Country* is neither pro-war, nor anti-war. It speaks not of politics, but of people. Like the war memorials erected in towns and villages around Britain, it enables people to reflect and to mourn.

By the time the Armistice is marked once more, the Royal Mail should get over its scruples and let McQueen finish the work he has started - so all of us can look on them and remember.