

FIREMEN ARTISTS 1940–45

'HEROES WITH GRIMY FACES'

Anthony Kelly

Little has hitherto been written about this brave, unique and little-known group of Second World War artists who were engaged both as artists and as active combatants on the Home Front, performing duties as firemen during the Blitz and after. This book is the first fully illustrated history to introduce the work and life of these artists in a context in which they can be easily understood and appreciated.

The Firemen Artist Group was made up of painters and designers who joined the wartime Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) as volunteers. Overcoming many problems and deficiencies, they were Britain's front line during the Blitz. Churchill called them 'heroes with grimy faces'. While others were in air-raid shelters, it was their job to fight fires. This enabled the artists in their ranks to experience and record extraordinary events, which they painted in their spare time. Showing remarkable energy and initiative, they organised their own exhibitions in London and the provinces, supplementing their wages by selling paintings. A tour of USA and Canada was a spectacular success as propaganda for Britain's cause and as part of Churchill's American strategy, giving fascinating insights into Anglo-American relations.

Unlike other war artists, they had taken part in the actions they depicted. Firestorms in London's dockland and in the City, raids on Coventry and Bath, crashed aircraft – these subjects inspired paintings which were both spectacular and authentic, creating the iconic image of the heroic fireman. They also show the first women ever to serve in the Fire Service, some of whom were also artists. In this respect the book will appeal both to those interested in art and to the military historian.

Starting with the AFS as an organisation and the qualities of the artists who joined it, the book follows the evolution of an independent group who combined front-line service with painting. Thematic and stylistic aspects of their work are explored. Recognising the documentary and informative elements of their Blitz paintings will not exclude myth, allegory and elements of abstract art. We see a new kind of portrait, showing those decorated for bravery, not just the rich and famous. This art covers an unusually wide spectrum: book covers, illustrations, humorous drawings and advertisements, as well as paintings and drawings.

Based on original research and new information from archives *Firemen Artists* includes over 180 stunning illustrations, many paintings not seen since wartime.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

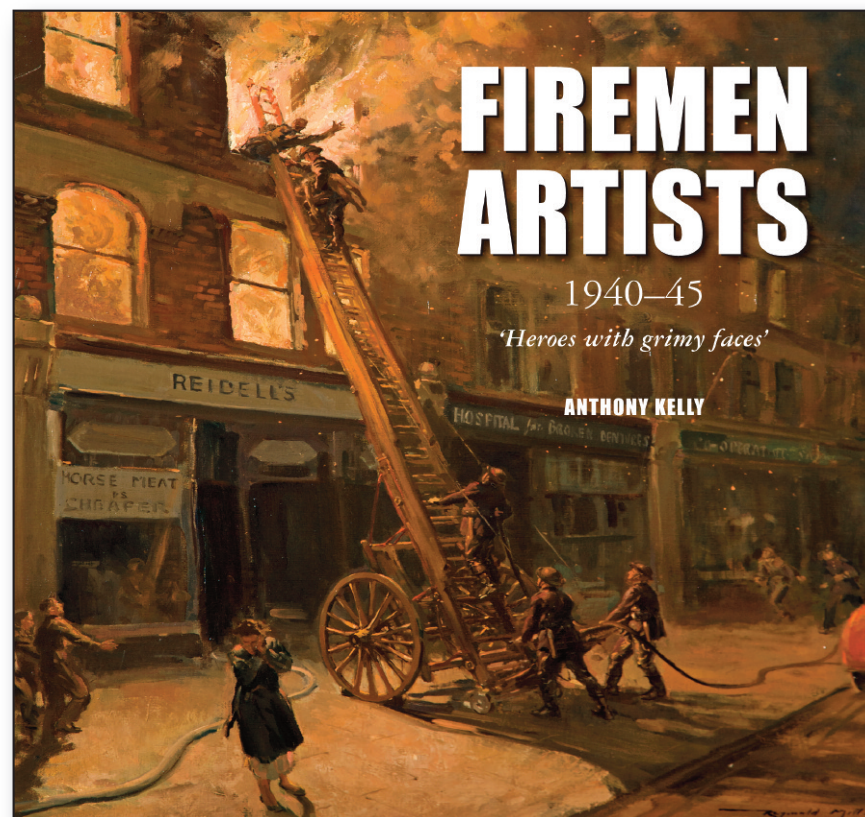
Anthony Kelly is an independent researcher and lecturer (NADFAS etc) with BA French and English, MA, PhD History of Art (University College London). Publications on literature and art, including war art.

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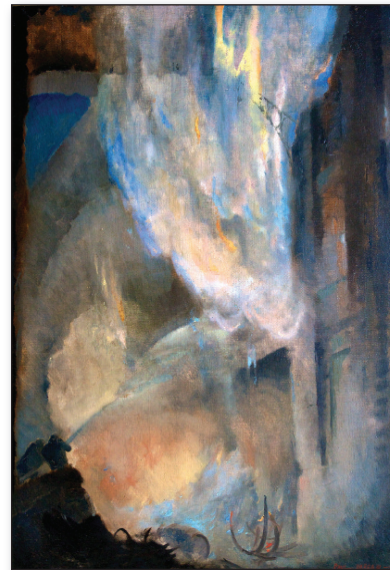
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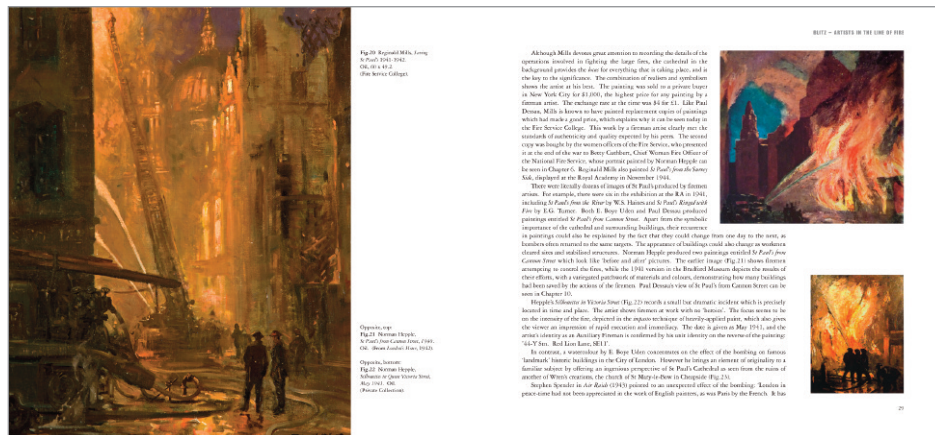
Above: Reginald Mills, *Resting at a Fire*, 1941. Oil, 60 x 78. (London Fire Brigade Museum).



Paul Dessau, *Spirit Fire*. Oil, 71 x 53. (London Fire Brigade Museum).



Right: Bernard Hailstone, *Evening in the City, April 1941*. Oil, 60.9 x 76.2. (Imperial War Museum).



Example of a double-page spread.