FLOWERS OF WAR EXHIBITION LAUNCH - PROFESSOR PAUL GOUGH

The appearance of cornflowers and poppies on the battlefields at the end of the First World War symbolised for many the hope of rebirth.

Shrine CEO Dean Lee is joined by Professor Paul Gough for the launch of our newest special exhibition, Flowers of War.

The appearance of cornflowers and poppies on the battlefields at the end of the First World War symbolised for many the fragility of life and the hope of rebirth. This collaborative work of art comprises enamelled floral emblems of remembrance, inspired by those found on the battlefield and at home.

Flowers of War is on display in the Shrine Galleries.

<https://www.shrine.org.au/flowers-war-exhibition-launch-professor-paul-gough>

## **Transcript**

**Voiceover:**Welcome to the Shrine of Remembrance podcast recorded live at our talks and events. Today's episode is the recording of the launch of the Shrine’s special centenary of armistice exhibition, Flowers of War. This extraordinary exhibition and work of art was officially opened this morning and will be on display in our galleries for the next 12 months. I'll now hand over to the Shrine CEO, Dean Lee, the MC for the launch to introduce the exhibition.

**Dean Lee:** To mark the centenary of the signing of the armistice and the end of the First World War, the Shrine Trustees are pleased to present Flowers of War. Artists and jewellers Kirsten Haydon, Elizabeth Turrell and Neal Haslem have created this beautiful and reflective commemorative wreath using hundreds of floral emblems from battlefields around the world. Inspired by those found on those same battlefields and the native flowers of those countries and all of the Allied nations who fought alongside Britain in that war.

Flowers of War has previously been displayed at various stages of its development during the Centenary of Anzac, but this is the first time that the entire piece will be presented to Australians and visitors to Victoria and Australia from around the world.

I'd like to welcome today our guest speaker Professor Paul Gough, who will speak to us about his presentation, ‘Seeds, soil, saplings, Reflections on the Flowers of War and Peace’. Paul is Pro Vice Chancellor and Vice President College of Design and Social Context at RMIT. He is a painter, broadcaster and writer and researcher on the iconography of commemoration, the cultural geographies of battlefields and the representations of peace and conflict. Please join me in welcoming Professor Paul Gough.

**Professor Paul Gough:** Thank you very much indeed. It's delightful to be here. Thank you for that wonderful introduction. I, just for the first time seeing the artwork up the stairs to the right hand side, having seen as various iterations, and Jean showed it to me and I turned the corner to see it and those who haven't seen it yet, and those who will see it in a short while, it is quite simply breath taking.

In the 18th century, they will use word ‘sublime’, but it is an extraordinary awesome object, both in terms of its magnitude, but also then its level of detail. So thank you very much for inviting me here say a few words. And this is part of an almost four year project that I've been involved in many, many colleagues in this country and overseas. I go back to 2015 when I was invited by Bruce Scates, professor at Monash and ANU now, to visit with a group of academics and writers and artists to visit Gallipoli and to work with the university over there and a number of us went across. And that was one of the most extraordinary occasions visits I had, because amongst them were some of the great Australian and New Zealand historians. The Bill Gamages, of the world, Robin Price, etc. That was a very, very momentous event. I thought I couldn't beat that and then early this year, I was with my family across in Macedonia, visiting some of the Great War sites in Macedonia. And I've just come back from Belgium working in Ypres, where they asked me to put together a rather more provocative paper around the nature of memory. And to be here and to see the piece of work and to talk about flowers and how they play such a great part in the iconography of remembrance is deeply touching.

A few people to thank over and above those just heard, is the sponsors both here at the Shrine- it's a very great commitment for any museum, any major icon of remembrance, such as this to make the commitment to artists and this organisation makes a big commitment, and also to creating New Zealand's World War 100 Co-Commissioning Fund. A big thank you to them and to all the curators here who have given the opportunity to show this evocative and very inclusive piece of artwork and that's one of its wonders is this sense of inclusivity.

I thought I'd start with a little bit of background on the artists and the designers—on Neal, Kirsten and Elizabeth—who created the artwork here. And a little bit about the object itself. This is how it was shown in the UK in the Royal West of England Academy which I have the honour of being a member. We'll come to that in a second.

Kirsten is in the room here wearing one of the enamels very beautifully on her lapel, studio leader in gold and silver smithing at RMIT School of Art. She's the only gold and silver smithing programmer at degree level in this country and is located in the old gold quarter of the North CBD. Kirsten specialises in enamelling processes for constructed jewellery. She was the recipient of the Lyn Kowalski jewellery craft award in 2017. The first time I ever saw her work was a stunning exhibition at Craft Victoria inspired by a fellowship that she had in 2004 to Antarctica and she was the first jeweller to take part in the artists to Antarctic program and some of the work it's right it's extraordinary using enamel in a kind of dusted chalky way but very evocative small pieces. And her research and practice explored the continent’s history and the experience of past visitors through the notion of souvenir.

Neal is also here and also he’s wearing a wonderful, what are you wearing today Neal? It’s a eucalyptus leaf, very beautiful eucalyptus leaf. He is a communication designer. The first time I saw his work was the equally stunning book design that he did for that exhibition called Micro Mosaic in 2012. Neal published work around communication and graphic design and its overlaps with intersubjective actions. His design thinking is rooted in continental philosophy, in particular Heidegger. And recently, Neal became Associate Dean in our wonderful RMIT School of Design.

Elizabeth Turrell I've known for a long time. First when she was the Senior Research Fellow in enamel in Bristol, which is the only position—the first such position—and she's now recognised as a leading authority in this aspect of the applied arts. A long history as an artist as an enameller, as a curator, and as a studio leader, bringing together enamellists from all over the world—I met many from the UK, Europe, USA, now here in Australia. Her studio in Bristol has the largest enamel kiln in the UK, possibly in Europe and is capable of doing architectural enamels which many, many worked in that process.

And I curated a big show of Elizabeth and Kirsten in 2014, on memory, conflict and commemoration in the Royal West England Academy, which is very extraordinary. There are five shows in it and Kirsten had a large piece of work. So it's fitting for me, four years later, to be here looking at this collaborative work of enamelled floral emblems of remembrance inspired by flowers, plants, seeds found on battlefields and here at home. And like the best of our research at RMIT, it's genuinely intercontinental collaboration. It cross countries from New Zealand, the UK, and now here to Australia. And to that end, one of the things that interests me is that the global exchange or trans global exchange of seeds and soil and plant took place in the decades after the First World War; when soldiers, veterans and relatives of the dead, brought home seedlings and small plants and grew them so that a little corner of some foreign field would grow both here but also over there. Wouldn't quite pass our customs regulations now, with seeds, soil and saplings. There is a small church in Canada, which is made up a great deal of rock and stone and objects taken by Canadian troops back to Canada. When I was at the In Flanders Field Museum of the last few years with Dominic, one of the curators there he was saying that what's happening now at that museum and Ypres, is that a great many objects that once found their way around the world, are being returned in this kind of repatriation. So when I was there, he just had a dented brass letterbox cover which had been taken by a soldier from South Africa and taken away and relatives say ‘it’s tome to repatriate these, to take them back’. And this idea of seeds and saplings and stone travelling the world is really quite extraordinary.

As we know, the cones from the Lone Pine in Gallipoli, found their way back to parks and reserves all over Australia and New Zealand and they were carefully nurtured by gardeners and brought back to life and those same cones and seeds from those trees, find their way back to the same battlefields. The memory escapes in a giant circle, a cycle of active remembering, played out by seeds and plants and flowers.

So that cycle of decay, rebirth and recovery is echoed, of course in the artwork created by Kirsten, Neal and Elizabeth. And as you'll see, or may have already seen, the artwork measures over two meters in diameter; is composed of more than 480 individual handcrafted broaches. It's taken, so Jean tells me, and my colleagues tell me, it’s taken over four days to install, including the work of two of our Masters students have been here working on it. Four days to install and arrange but many years to create, because it draws on stories of the war, from community archives, from museums, but also from individuals who want to reconnect with ancestors and relatives long past.

It was nourished by the contribution of dozens of unseen hands, who have created new flowers, new leaves, family memories, hopes and private wishes embedded in each of those small intense gems of colour. And people are quite fascinated. If you've ever worked in enamel—and I know I have with my children we created a enamel for a big project that Elizabeth was doing in one of the big hospitals in the UK—people are fascinated by the process of drawing and painting onto enamel. The materiality of each part is both absorbing, but also the word I used earlier rather sublime, rather overwhelming in its intensity of colour of delicately drawn line, that can only really be achieved through enamelling. And it takes an extraordinary level of craftsmanship to realise the vision that we are presented with in Flowers of War.

Beyond the sheer thrill of the materials, the artwork for me chimes richly with our feelings about the emotional potency of flowers, and in particular, about the appearance of cornflowers and poppies on the battlefield at the end of the First World War, which for many symbolised both the fragility of life, and also the hope of rebirth.

I want to spend a short time reflecting on the power of flowers, trees and gardens. The power that they have in evoking and provoking memory, particularly the memory of young lives cut short by war. This is a photograph I took with my wife recently. We were at the National Memorial Arboretum in the centre of England, which has become the National Memorial shrine in many ways, not supplanting the Cenotaph or Westminster Abbey, but it's become a place using gardens, using trees and using the life cycle of nature. And each tree can be dedicated. So trees are still waiting, a memory waiting to be dedicated, waiting to be owned, as it were.

The floral tribute might be regarded as the first draft in the process of remembering. Not only can flowers speak a thousand words but flowers are brought to sites of trauma as a way of both marking specific loss, but also as a way of participating in the early stages of grieving. Perhaps the defining moment of the floral tribute, in recent history at least, was the mass grieving for Princess Diana, which took place in 1997. In a little over one week, some 20 million blooms, weighing an estimated 10,000 tons, were laid outside Buckingham Palace and Clarence House and I thought at that time, is like a floral aneurism, a sudden tsunami of pent-up emotion bursting out of St. James Palace, and Buckingham Palace across the stately avenues of Imperial London. Now there was cynics. Cynics who regarded this hysteria as little more than synthetic emotion, or even as it was termed at the time, recreational grief. But there is little doubt that the major British institutions, the media, the Royal Family, the police and even the church were taken totally by surprise. There was no pre-planned script. There are a few precedents of procedure, no protocol, and some believe that the resulting mass public mourning created a new cultural order. And mourning was not just restricted to London. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims created shrines to the dead princess adorned with flowers, teddy bears, balloons, messages and other votive offerings, and in towns all over the UK and in cities, it was often the war memorial that people took their flowers, their votives, their offerings, to place. So looking back, it's still difficult to tell whether this was evidence of a media induced hysteria or magnification of normal morning behaviour. But flowers play such a key part in the creation of any secular shrine. But many asked—many commentators including me when I was on the media a little at the time, asked—why is it that we created a cellophane meadow a meadow of plastic? Why do we leave the flowers wrapped in plastic? There was going to be a debate in the BBC on the radio and then someone rang in and said, ‘listen, it's simple, cellophane and ribbons means one thing. Look, I didn't nick these from the park, I paid good money for them to prove I care’.

But there's actually little new about mass floral displays during times of national trauma. If you look about during the end of the First World War 1918–19, there were what was called the shrine movement, where vast piles of flowers and plants were created, maintained, and then routed and corners all across the British Empire. And if you think of these as geological layers, these became the initial layer on which the obelisks, the Cenotaph would grow out of the greenery. And look again at how we mark in this city, Remembrance Sunday or Anzac Day, not just by adopting the poppy as our personal emblem of remembering, but look at the crochet. Look at the knitted flowers. Look at those powerful tracts of crimson, laid like red carpets along St Kilda Road and in Federation Square. They are symbolic temporary gardens created for a unique moment of commemoration. And they remind us that we value a fundamental truth about the link between flowers, mourning, remembrance and love. Flowers die, gardens reveal the actualities of death. Yet the gardener has the skill to nurture and keep plants alive and a well tended garden can act as a symbolic safeguard against disorder, against the randomness the death—particularly by war—can bring.

As with any landscape, the garden develops meaning through a complex interaction between the here and now and the there and then. Flowers are a palliative for melancholy. They are a congenial environment, for solitary contemplation, gardens and flowers are emblematic of the cause of human life. Like people, flowers and gardens grow, mature, age and die. And the designers of gardens recognise the connections between the individual the community and the greater causes, whether they be religious, aesthetic or political.

And they're also powerful theatrical or dramaturgical environments, because the stage setting of the garden can represent both physical vulnerability and transience. So it's both suggestive of decay and renewal. And think of the garden space of the Domain. Around us, the careful arrangement of trees and shrubs, and the way they are identified with specific military units, campaigns and individuals. It's not so much that nature frames the monument. Rather that the choreographed landscape is the monument. It's a living and changing memorial.

So garden memorials have perhaps the unique capacity of all art forms to evoke poignant analogies between human existence, the fragility of nature and the consolation of cyclic regeneration. And a well-tended garden is a symbolic bulwark against atrophy and decay. Indeed, a skilled gardener can appear to postpone, even eradicate death. by judicious and diligent plant management.

A good example of this is an unkempt lawn is an indication of slovenly habits, of indifference and a lack of care. A well-maintained flowerbed, a finely manicured lawn can soften the edges of loss and grief. And historian David Sheppard wrote that, ‘it was actually the exactitude the finely manicured edges in the Commonwealth War Graves, museums and the turf that prevent that becoming mawkish. That attention to detail, the assiduous mow and clip, are all about the attention to detail with respect to the past’.

So this perhaps explains the decision after the Great War to create the garden cemeteries that traverse the Western Front like the beads on a rosary. After the armistice, the Imperial War Graves Commission took over the task of remembering the dead across the many theatres of war, where British, Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, South African, Sri Lankan soldiers made their sacrifice.

The scale of task facing the commission was immense, its achievements equally so. By 1921, its architects and gardeners had established over 1000 permanent sites of cemetery in France and Belgium alone. They comprise 200 acres of lawn, 75 miles of flower border and 15 miles of hedge, and on other theatres of war in the Dardanelles, and in Macedonia, the horticultural and architectural effort was no less heroic.

In 1915, a scheme had been founded to plant home grown maple on the seeds of Canadian graves and that same year, the Australian wattle plant had been planted on graves at Gallipoli. In 1929, a pilgrimage from Melbourne to Turkey, 48 women and 38 men from this city, carried with them thousands and thousands of sprigs of artificial waffle purchased and given to them by bereaved relatives, unable to undertake the long and expensive voyage. Those springs were laid on the graves and memorials, thus enabling the absent mourners to participate vicariously through nature and powerful floral emblems.

Similarly, cuttings of Olearia and Veronica Traversier were bought across from New Zealand, and in cemeteries with Chinese, Sri Lankan, Indian graves, the Commission had to ensure that only plants considered sacred and appropriate for commemoration were planted. Indians, for example, regarded iris, marigold, cypress as suitable in such memory scapes. And if we look closely at Flowers of War, you will see enamels of the chamomile daisy, the mountain daisy from New Zealand, the Bird's eye banksia and there are numerous references to leaves, flowers plants in the domain here, in the remembrance gardens less than 50 metres from where we sit now. And of course, there are many, many poppies. The flower most associated across the British Empire, the former British Empire, across associated with the trench war. Yet the poppy is a strangely ambiguous emblem of war in many ways. We wear it because it is associated with memory. And yet the poppy is also an opiate, which induces forgetfulness, amnesia, the sleep of reason. So over in France in Belgium, Macedonia and Gallipoli, despite in different soils, challenging climates, earth strewn with metal fragments, and even occasional local hostility, the commission prevailed. Gardeners worked hard to grow plants associated with the dead from the far reaches of the Empire. However, whereas white roses, pinks, London pride, Mossisacaphages, Cerastium and thrift, thrived in the northern climates, more exotic strands such as bougainvillea, which was intended to commemorate the graves of soldiers in the West Indies failed. And then also, rather peculiarly, more wild erratic plantings emerged from nowhere. Flowers native to Northern Scotland found their way to the Western Front, because they’d been harboured inside the consignments of turnips meant to feed huge numbers of working horses.

In 1927, Louis Bleriot flew over the Western Front in an airplane and deposited a hundred thousand poppy leaves, poppy petals. So returning veterans and the parents of the dead made discreet additions to the immaculate horticulture of the military cemeteries. I don't have a slide of it, somewhere lost in my archives, but on the Helles Peninsula in Gallipoli, the father of Lieutenant Eric Duckworth travelled all the way from Northern England from Rochdale to secretly plant a small English oak in Redoubt Cemetery in Gallipoli. And against all the odds, and the odds are against it, it's survived. It still thrives. It stands to the right of the entrance gate. It ever so slightly upsets the elegant symmetry of a formal of planting and reputedly the only English Oak on that bloody peninsula. So the place for guerrilla gardening for actually interventions, you see it now you see it now people doing it, leaving all sorts of objects. This exchange of seeds and plants and flowers is extraordinary.

Inevitably, it was the rose. The rose was regarded as exemplary floral symbol. The symbolic and emotional power of roses can never be underestimated. In a typical year in the 1990s, for instance, the cemetery authorities planted 57,000 roses in France and Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom alone. In contrast, poppies are rarely part of the formal planting schema. As flowering plants, the two could not be more different. Whereas the rose has to be carefully nurtured and cared for within a proper horticultural regime, the poppy grows erratically and without warning on broken ground, so it thrived on the pulverised landscape of the Great War battlefield. But despite its vital place in the mythology in the visual culture of the war, it’s unpredictability and short lifespan means it has no place in a formal planting system. So in a very profound way, the rose and the poppy marked the two poles of floral symbolism. The one, formal labour intensive and permanent, the other, is arbitrary, spontaneous and ephemeral.

And I think it's this idea to close, this idea of permanence, and yet temporary, informal and also formal. Maybe the underlying theme of this exhibition Flowers of War, or more properly, perhaps flowers of peace. For me, it also reinforces flower as power. The primacy of nature of a normal icon of commemoration. You see, it could be argued that, I've stood up in events like this and argued, that there is nothing more invisible than a monument. They just become they look like another part of our over furnished cities, invisible for much of the year. Statues and cenotaphs are pretty redundant as ways of provoking memory. Do they really satisfy our anxiety of erasure? It seems that they actually can obscure the past. They can induce forgetfulness, except for the one day when they bloom with flowers. And by contrast, gardens need to be constantly tended and they need to be looked after. Flowers and plants require ongoing care and vigilance. Whereas most monuments of stone and bronze speak in a dull monologue, gardens and flowers create a dialogue, a rich conversation with the future rather than a past, which enslaves us to repetition and requires us to be little more than an aggregate of well-managed spectators.

Monuments may indeed be great icons of architecture. Like the Shrine of Remembrance here in Melbourne, they may have and they do have a magnetic power that draws pilgrims, tourists and visitors. But gardens require us to not only to act out the past, but to actively participate in growing the future, to remain constantly vigilant and caring. And the exhibition Flowers of War speaks to this ideal, curated by a few, but co-created by many. It espouses ideals of caring and community, compassion and creativity. It complements the grandeur of its surroundings. But it reminds us that peace is an elusive thing. It has no end point it must be nurtured and maintained, nourished and monitored, lest we fall into the traumatic and terrible temptations of conflict.

Thank you.

[audience applause]

**Dean Lee:** Obviously, a very thoughtful presentation from Paul, thank you very much for sharing those thoughts and particularly what resonates for me, is the fact this remembrance component exists both in a retrospective sense, what went before, but also in terms of informing us and shaping our actions and decisions as we move forward. And through honouring memory and through remembering we ensure that we are ever mindful of the prices that have been paid to give us the peace that we enjoy today and the reason we need to continue to be vigilant.

Paul, thank you very much for your presentation, and particularly in recognising the great work that's been done in developing this installation, which we'll be seeing shortly. I wish to thank the artists Kirsten Haydon, Elizabeth Turrell and Neal Haslem.

And, of course Melburnians will enjoy this exhibition over the coming 12 months. But with those Melburnians you will find visitors from throughout Australia, New Zealand and the rest of the world who come to the Shrine each year. We are sitting in a space now, which was created in 2014, to coincide with the centenary of the First World War. And since that period of time the Shrine has been attracting over 1 million people each year to its commemorative programs: that's coming as visitors to the shrine, participating in our ceremonial activities across the year, visiting us online and interacting with our podcasts and other digital assets that we've been putting out there. So this exhibition will speak to roughly 1 million people over this coming year and will allow them to explore the themes of commemoration, consider the rebirth, which occurs after conflict, and be ever mindful of the cycle of life that is presented through these floral attributes.

The artists have asked that the following thanks be extended to Mrs. Pam Haydon for her generous support during the intense period of producing the wreath and I do know that was an intense period of production and to Katherine Hubble and Mindy McSwan for their assistance in installing the wreath and Paul mentioned that really, it's been a phenomenal effort over not simply the four years which is impressive in itself, but the work that's been done in this past week just to simply present this and to consider its presentation at such depth and detail has been remarkable. And I think you'll all be witness to that quite shortly.

I also pay tribute to the dedication and professionalism of my staff and in particular, obviously, Director of Access Learning Jean McAuslan and Mr Toby Miller. Toby has been absolutely instrumental as the exhibition research officer in helping to get this done and also helping to produce the digital assets which sit alongside it, so that we may explore the floral themes.

Now all of us going to go and look at it at different points in time, but I'd also highlight that on this rare occasion of the centenary of the armistice, we've chosen to dedicate our Remembrance magazine to this particular piece of work. And the cover of our Remembrance magazine features the point of the floral emblems that are portrayed within the roof just arrived hot off the presses yesterday, and they are available outside for those of you who are not Friends, who reserved them as part of their Friends program. If you'd like to get one, you can get one here today, as a permanent keepsake sake of this exhibition.

Now, Jean, Kirsten and Neal will be hosting a talk on Thursday of next week at midday, I believe. As you can see, this is a very popular piece, and no doubt there'll be a lot of people booking in for that tour. So if you'd like to participate, just book on the Shrine’s website or talk to staff and they can provide you with assistance if you need to do so.

That brings us to the end of our formalities for today. I did mention the fact that we create podcasts. All of our presentations are recorded and they're available by the Shrines website or the Apple iTunes Store, so you can listen to Paul's presentation again. I've already made some notes that I will certainly be listening to it again, I was very impressed with many of the references made to remembrance and commemoration. So thank you again Paul for that.

Thank you for supporting your Shrine. Thank you for participating in today's program. And I have to say that in closing of the Centenary of Anzac, to have the opportunity to present a work that has been many years in its conceptualisation and its execution is very fitting. This is not a one-off thing. This is something which has been the sweat of labour across an extended period, and I'm sure you will agree with me when you see it in its installed location, it is a most fitting tribute as we close the Centenary of Anzac. I encourage you to share with your friends, its presence here at the Shrine and encourage them to visit us.

And I do hope to see many of you on Sunday 11 November this year. It is the centenary of the war that changed our world, and I would ask that you join us in recognising that most significant event in our nation's history. Thank you very much. Thank you.

**Voiceover:**Thank you for listening to the Shrines podcast series. Flowers of War can be viewed daily in our galleries with last entry at 4:30pm. You can also join Jean McAuslan in conversation with the artists Kirsten Haydon and Neal Haslem, at midday on Thursday, the first of November. They'll be discussing the evolution and creation of this extraordinary work of art and sharing the inspiration behind the project. Bookings are essential and can be made through the links in this episode show notes. For those of you who are not able to travel to the Shrine, a preview of the exhibition is featured in the newest edition of our Remembrance magazine, which just hit the shelves today. Digital copies can be purchased this issuu. Links to this are also available in the episode show notes. Thank you

Recorded in October 2018.

Paul Gough is Vice-Chancellor of the Arts University Bournemouth, and was previously the Pro Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President at RMIT University, Melbourne.

A painter, broadcaster & writer, Gough has exhibited internationally; represented in permanent collections Imperial War Museum, London, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, National War Memorial, New Zealand. Recent Australian exhibitions were supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant, 2017-19. His research interests lie in iconographies of commemoration, cultural geographies of battlefields, and representation of peace and conflict.

PG response 20 Dec 2022

Thank you to Shrine CEO Dean Lee and colleagues at the Shrine for making this recording available with such an extensive typescript. It was a great pleasure to be involved with this exhibition and to work with so many wonderful artists, designers, and historians during the project in Melbourne and further afield.