The Courier: 21st-Century Tales from WWI at the New Haven Museum

New Haven, Conn. (November 2, 2017) – How do you give the century-old tale of World War I (WWI) the brio needed to captivate a 21st-century audience? If you’re the New Haven Museum (NHM), you do it by commissioning an award-winning comic-book illustrator from New Haven, Nadir Balan, to create a series of dynamic, oversized, graphic-novel style murals, based on the dramatic WWI diary of one New Haven serviceman who witnessed firsthand the adventure, horror, and pathos of the front lines. The powerful result, “The Courier: Tales from the Great War,” opens at the Museum on November 7, 2017, with a reception from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. It remains on view through the centenary of the WWI armistice, November 11, 2018.

Balan’s dynamic palette of black, white, and brilliant red creates a nostalgic, comic-book style loaded with the iconic WWI imagery reminiscent of the “hero” comics that came of age in the 1930s — doughboys in uniform, tri-planes, Zeppelins, and plenty of explosions. The dynamic drawings drop the viewer right into the action with New Haven’s Lt. Philip H. English. Replete with emotive scenes of both joy and loss, the panels create what the artist calls an “old-world narrative,” but with decidedly contemporary flair.

The first 4-by-6-foot mural, depicting English’s entry into the war, includes bold renderings of soldiers proudly marching off to war, with gleeful young boys tagging along through the streets of New Haven, a sliver of Camp Yale and the Winchester Arms Manufacturing Company, and English’s distraught mother waving goodbye in the background. Each subsequent panel features
a montage of images, a composite of the events and locations English experienced while serving as a mud-covered motorcycle courier, barreling back and forth along the front lines and among the farms and forests of France.

The concept for the exhibition focused on English’s hyper-local perspective on a worldwide event, rather than attempting to explain the colossus that was WWI. “We didn’t want to introduce other aspects of the war into the exhibit, but, rather, let Philip English’s narrative tell the story,” says Co-Curator and NHM Director of Photo Archives, Jason Bischoff-Wurstle. “It’s as though English is ghost-curating the show.” Anyone walking into the gallery will be stepping into Philip English’s action-packed diary, which will be posted in its entirety on the Museum’s website for exhibition viewers eager to read English’s entire story.

Co-Curator and Collections Manager Mary Christ says Balan’s abiding interest in WWI made the exhibit’s transition from concept to reality surprisingly easy. “Nadir sketched those parts of the diary that resonated most with him,” she says. “When we saw the sketches, we knew we shared the same vision of what was most important to project in the show. We second-guessed none of it.”

“Cartooning is the perfect medium to tell this story,” Balan says. “Heroic idealism, patriotic messages, and the contrast of good and evil were hugely represented in comic books during times of war.” As such, he explains, “Comic-book style drawing quickly pulls in the viewer because when you see it you know it’s a narrative.” He adds, “My goal is for people to get a real sense of English’s emotional and physical journey from the murals.”

Of the exhibit’s subject matter, Balan says that while he was drawn to it artistically, it was the greater impact of the war that also drew him in. “I don’t think you can understand our modern world without understanding World War I,” he says. “This war was the foundation for our modern map, and led to World War II, of course, and the ripples are still being felt.”

In planning for the exhibition, the Museum wanted to differentiate its commemoration of the war’s centenary from the host of others across the state, and indeed, around the globe, while capturing young audiences. “We think Nadir’s work provides an entry point for young people, with whom graphic-novels are extremely popular,” says Executive Director Margaret Anne
Tockarshewsky. She adds that the aim is to make the public aware of a remote event once known as the “war to end all wars,” that has been virtually forgotten. “People alive today have no first-hand knowledge of WWI, so the goal is to create awareness in a way that will spark their curiosity and prompt inquiry and conversation.”

In the museum’s rotunda, a second element of the exhibition includes selected photos and annotations from a scrapbook English put together after returning to New Haven in April, 1919. In contrast with Balan’s high-impact murals in the Museum’s North Gallery, the enlarged black-and-white images offer glimpses of New Haven’s 102nd Regiment as the war progressed. English created, in his words, a “record of their patriotic duty on many battle fronts.” In 1976, English, who, with his wife Katharine, was a member and supporter of the New Haven Colony Historical Society for over 50 years, donated his diary and scrapbook to the organization, now known as the New Haven Museum. The Museum gratefully acknowledges the Richard L. English Fund and James D. English for continuing to support local history.

About Nadir Balan
Balan started his career at Marvel Entertainment in 2002. His work has since been featured in books, magazines, and comic books across the globe. His publishers and clients have included Devil's Due Press, Verso Books, Archaia Black Label, Boom! Studios, Yale University, Kaiser Permanente, World Science Festival, and Wizards of the Coast among others. In 2007, he developed the “Wrath of the Titans” series with Ray Harryhausen, which was later made into a movie. His latest projects include collaborations with William Shatner, Stan Lee (God Woke), and Dan Fogler (Moon Lake Omnibus, Brooklyn Gladiator).

About the New Haven Museum
The New Haven Museum has been collecting, preserving and interpreting the history and heritage of Greater New Haven since its inception as the New Haven Colony Historical Society in 1862. Located in downtown New Haven at 114 Whitney Avenue, the Museum brings more than 375 years of New Haven history to life through its collections, exhibitions, programs and outreach. For more information visit http://newhavenmuseum.org or Facebook.com/NewHavenMuseum or call 203-562-4183.

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