

CAMOUFLAGE AUSTRALIA

ART, NATURE, SCIENCE AND WAR

ANN ELIAS

PREFACE BY ROY R. BEHRENS



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*In memory of Minas Elias, a makeshift camouflage officer
in Burma, World War II*

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Preface

To put it simply, this book is the little-known story of how Australian artists made pivotal contributions to military and civilian defence camouflage during World War II.

At the same time, as the author explains, its scope is considerably larger than that. While Australian ‘fine artists’ (painters, sculptors, printmakers) contributed immeasurably to wartime camouflage, in doing so they worked beside other art- and design-related professionals, such as photographers, graphic designers and architects. They also collaborated with scientists (zoologists, in particular), and with professional soldiers, who often considered concealment to be a sign of cowardice, a subversion of military discipline, and a promotion of battlefield attitudes that were both peculiar and unmanly.

An Australian-based art historian, Ann Elias has written about camouflage for more than a decade. I myself was first drawn to her research when I realised that, unlike so many camouflage scholars, her concern is not merely with military aspects of the subject, but with a vast range of interesting facets, both social and historical. Especially memorable is her incisive analysis of the life and professional work of prominent British-born zoologist W.J. Dakin, the father of Australian camouflage, to whom she devotes a good part of this book.

Ann Elias is a university scholar and art historian who, despite the tendency in our time toward recondite, specialised research, has maintained an astonishing balance between her targeted interests (the trees on academic turf) and their role in a much larger cultural view (the forest of the human race). In part, she is able to do this because she is a skilled and inspiring writer, a person who genuinely writes to be read. Witness these terse yet provocative lines from her introduction: ‘Invisibility is simply visibility in disguise. It is the outcome of a process of visual transformations in which the deadly appear innocent and the innocent deadly.’

So, yes—while this book is a close-up look at how Australian artists and designers contributed to World War II camouflage, it is just as much about human vision and the brain; the amazing degree to which form and function deftly fit in the evolved appearance of animals; our persistent susceptibility to racial and gender stereotypes; the military mindset as contrasted with that of civilians; and the cultural headbutts that tend to result from the proximity of artists, scientists and military engineers. But there is much more.

To my mind, Ann Elias’ most accomplished achievement is the very act of crossing disciplines. With that in mind, I find it instructive to look closely at the exquisite drawings by British zoologist Hugh B. Cott of the hind limbs of the common frog (reproduced in Elias’ introduction as fig. I.4). For Cott, these were iconic examples of what he called ‘coincident disruption,’ occurrences of camouflage in which blending (unit-forming) and

disruption (unit-breaking) work together in the same space. As the frog merely folds up its legs, the dark shapes on its surface join to hide the oneness of its limb.

Ann Elias describes this book as 'an Australian arm of a much bigger story about the crossing of discipline boundaries'. Metaphorically, I think of it this way: she has folded up a lengthy limb of scholarly tradition (made up of sacrosanct disciplines like aesthetics, zoology, anthropology and sociology), in order to reveal new zones that are cross-disciplinary.

Roy R. Behrens
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The Australian War Memorial, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Archives of Australia, the National Gallery of Australia, the State Library of Victoria, the National Gallery of Victoria, the University of Sydney Art Collections, the University of Liverpool Library, Maria Fernanda Cardoso, Debra Dawes, Paul D. Brock and Jack W. Hasenpusch were more than generous with images. Every attempt has been made to trace copyright owners to obtain permissions for the publication of images and to pay usage fees. Earlier versions of parts of chapters 4, 5, 10 and 11 appeared in *Journal of Australian Studies*, *Leonardo*, *History of Photography*, and Prue Ahrens and Chris Dixon (eds), *Coast to coast: case histories of modern Pacific crossings* (2010).

Finally, Greg Poynter and Rose Poynter have loyally accompanied me on research trips from Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia to Liverpool in the United Kingdom, and always stayed interested in the subject of camouflage.



Fig. I.1. Artificial rock. On verso: 'Department Home Security, ACT: S.L. Post & Sentry etc.', c. 1943. Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales and Archive.

Abbreviations

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AGNSW	Art Gallery of New South Wales
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ANGAU	Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
AWM	Australian War Memorial
CMF	Citizen Military Forces
DCCC	Defence Central Camouflage Committee
DHS	Department of Home Security
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NSW	New South Wales
RAAF	Royal Australian Airforce
RAE	Royal Australian Engineers
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
<i>SMH</i>	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
SW Pacific	South West Pacific
US	United States
VDC	Volunteer Defence Corps
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II