Art and the World Wars

By Trevor Getz

If art is a mirror held to society, what did people see in the era of the world wars, and how did it shape what they created?

820L
Introduction

Art can serve as a kind of mirror for society. It reflects people’s experiences, thoughts, and feelings. It can help us understand our ever-changing world.

The two world wars of the 1900s were enormous, dramatic, terrible periods. One of the ways people reacted to war was by creating art. Let’s look at some artwork that came out of these dark times. Consider what they tell us about people and war.

Art and the First World War

The First World War transformed the art world. Some art was used to make people want to join the war effort. Norman Lindsay’s posters, for example, tried to recruit Australian men to fight for Great Britain. Posters of his like Fight or Wait aimed to produce an emotional response that made you want to fight.

Many states sent artists to the front lines to sketch the battlefields. These artists showed the real horrors of war. The artist George Harding joined American forces in France. He sketched and painted the terrible scenes he witnessed. Traffic to Mont St. Père, for example, shows the destruction of a town.

The First World War inspired poetry as well as visual art. Much of it mourned the loss of life. Some poets fought on the front lines, and several died in combat. Female poets wrote about the war too. One example is Ada Harrison, whose poem New Year, 1916 is below:

_Those that go down into silence. . . _

_There is no silence in their going down, _
_Although their grave-turf is not wet with tears, _
_Although Grief passes by them, and Renown _
_Has garnered them no glory for the years._

_The cloud of war moves on, and men forget _
That empires fall. We go our heedless ways _
Unknowing still, uncaring still, and yet _
The very dust is clamorous with their praise._

After World War I, the world began to reflect on the years of death and destruction. Art was one way for people to understand the meaning of war. One particular school of art arose at this time. It was the Dada movement. Dada artists argued that the war was a result of the rise of science and a new emphasis on reason. These new ways of thinking had lessened the importance of humanity and emotion, these artists said. Dada art was meant to offend and ask hard questions. It ignored the often rigid rules of art. This can be seen in Hannah Höch’s _Cut with the Kitchen Knife._

---

*Norman Lindsay, The Trumpet Calls, 1917. © Getty Images.*
The Surrealist movement emerged alongside Dada. It began in Paris at the end of the war. This type of art expressed ideas, thoughts, and feelings directly, leaving “reality” behind. Surrealists felt the First World War had been caused by people wanting to obey and conform, and its artists and poets stressed non-conformity. Their art combined things that others would not have thought belonged together. Surrealists also raised questions about whether the world we think we see is what really exists. A great example is René Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images*. It is an image of a pipe above the words *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*. (“This is not a pipe.”) And Magritte was right: it’s not a pipe, just a picture of a pipe. But he may also be suggesting something else: Perhaps what we think we are experiencing in the world is just a representation or illusion of reality.
Art and the Second World War

The art of the period between the wars was both rich and chaotic. This was also a period of changing beliefs. The world saw a rise in fascism and communism. These political movements saw surreal art as too uncontrollable. They viewed it as a serious threat. The Nazis in Germany were one group that targeted art. After they rose to power, they attempted to wipe out the art styles they didn’t like. A great deal of art was burned.

Authoritarian governments also produced their own artworks. They sponsored art celebrating modernity, organization, and obedience. One of the most important productions was Triumph of the Will, a film about Adolf Hitler. The film was made by German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl in 1935. It is a two-hour propaganda piece meant to show Adolf Hitler as a man of action. Propaganda is a kind of art used to spread a belief or idea.

The war was also a period of new art. Some of it was openly racist. For example, there were many anti-Japanese pieces in the United States. Other countries used propaganda in the territories they took over or were trying to take over. They hoped art would convince people to help them or to obey them. One example is this Japanese leaflet from 1943. It is meant to convince Indian citizens not to join up to fight Japan.
Post-war art

In the United States, the end of the war in 1945 transformed who could make art. Previously, art had not been a career many people could afford to pursue. But the GI Bill, which paid for veterans to go to university, allowed many students to receive training in art. This led to many new types of creativity. One was "pop art," a movement that challenged people’s ideas of who art was for and who could make it. Just the wealthy few, as usual? Or could anyone be an artist now? Andy Warhol’s 32 Campbell’s Soup Cans perfectly expresses the questions pop art tried to raise. It reproduces a common everyday object. Can’t tell if it’s really art? That’s exactly what Warhol hoped you would think about!
Meanwhile, in 1949 the Communist Party came to power in China. The party introduced new ideas about the purpose of art. Party Chairman Mao Zedong directed that art be “a powerful weapon for uniting and educating the people, fighting and destroying the enemy.” Art that was considered not useful was banned. The only art supported by the government was very realistic, pro-communist, and pro-government. The painting below is an example of the kind of work the government favored.
The end of the war laid the groundwork for decolonization. Around the world, European colonies fought to achieve independence. As a result, art aimed at liberation began to emerge around the world. We will leave you with one example by Sudanese artist Ibrahim El Salahi’s *The Arising*. Until 1956, Sudan was controlled by British and Egyptian powers. Sudan is in northern Africa.

*Ibrahim El Salahi, The Arising, undated. From the National Archives, 558994.*
Sources

Trevor Getz
Trevor Getz is a professor of African and world history at San Francisco State University. He has been the author or editor of 11 books, including the award-winning graphic history *Abina and the Important Men*, and has coproduced several prize-winning documentaries. Trevor is also the author of *A Primer for Teaching African History*, which explores questions about how we should teach the history of Africa in high school and university classes.

Image credits
**Cover image:** Going “over the top.” The soldiers scrambling over the trench parapet are Canadians. They are retaking the French village of Neuville-Vitasse from the Germans in August 1918. By Alfred Bastien. Courtesy of the Canadian War Museum, public domain.
**Norman Lindsay, The Trumpet Calls, 1917.** © Universal History Archive / Getty Images.
**Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann** standing to the right of Höch’s Cut with the Kitchen Knife, Berlin, 1920. © Apic / Getty Images.
**A 1935 movie poster of Triumph of the Will.** © LMPC via Getty Images.
**Ibrahim El Salahi, The Arising, undated.** From the National Archives, 558994. https://catalog.archives.gov/id/558994

**Newsela**
Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: www.lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/

To learn more about Newsela, visit www.newsela.com

**Lexile**
The Lexile® Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured.
Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at www.Lexile.com.
OER PROJECT

OER Project aims to empower teachers by offering free and fully supported history courses for middle- and high-school students. Your account is the key to accessing our standards-aligned courses that are designed with built-in supports like leveled readings, audio recordings of texts, video transcripts, and more. Offerings include a variety of materials, from full-year, standards-based courses to shorter course extensions, all of which build upon foundational historical thinking skills in preparation for AP, college, and beyond.

To learn more about The OER Project, visit www.oerproject.com