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?

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Introduction

What is “art”? There’s no single definition, but some say it is a mirror we hold up to society that helps us understand our ever-changing world. The two world wars of the twentieth century were enormous, dramatic, terrible periods, and one of the ways people reacted to them was through creating art. Let’s look at some of those creations and consider what they tell us about the societies that went through, and emerged from, the world wars.

Art and the First World War

The First World War transformed the artistic world. Some of the art it produced, especially in the beginning, was used to excite and mobilize people for war. A great example is Australian artist Norman Lindsay’s posters, which tried to recruit men to the Australian forces fighting for Great Britain. Posters like The Trumpet Calls were both realistic and expressive, meant to evoke an emotional response that made you want to fight.

Once the war was under way, many states commissioned artists to go to the front lines to draw the battlefields. This kind of art had a long tradition in Europe, but it was difficult given the new realities of industrialized warfare. Instead of romantic images of triumphant battles, a lot of art that emerged from the front lines of this war detailed the terrible existence and shortened lives of the combatants. The artist George Harding, sent to accompany the American forces in France, sketched and painted the devastating scenes he witnessed. Traffic to Mont St. Père, for example, depicts the destruction of a town by artillery and airplanes.

Then there is art that we read, rather than view. Poems about the First World War mourned the loss of life, destruction of property, and death of innocence. Some of these poets had fought, and often died, on the front lines, like Britain’s Siegfried Sassoon, Russia’s Ilya Ehrenburg, Germany’s Gerrit Engelke, and France’s Louis Pergaud. Others were women who felt the agonizing loss of a generation and wrote about it, like Ada Harrison, who wrote New Year, 1916:

_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._

Norman Lindsay, The Trumpet Calls, 1917. © Getty Images.
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 the war, much of the world continued to grapple with the years of death and destruction. There was a sort of post-traumatic reaction in many societies. It affected nearly everyone, but especially the many millions of war veterans. Art reflected this struggle and was a way of coming to terms with the meaning and causes of the war. One particular school of art, the Dada movement, argued that the war was a result of the rise of science and emphasis on reason, and that had diminished humanism and emotion. Dada art was meant to offend and ask hard questions. It ignored the often rigid rules of art and embraced irrationality, as can be seen in Hannah Höch’s *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*.

Alongside Dada, the Surrealist movement emerged, beginning in Paris at the end of the war. This type of art conveyed ideas, thoughts, and feelings, leaving “reality” behind. Surrealists generally felt that the First World War had been caused by people wanting to obey and conform, and its artists and poets stressed non-conformity. They fused together items and elements that others would not have thought belonged together, and 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 that 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 therefore both rich and chaotic. But the rising tide of fascism, authoritarianism, and communism was an attempt to impose order on the world, at least in many countries. These ideologies saw surreal art as too uncontrollable and too “deviant”, and many leaders viewed it as a serious threat. In Germany, once the Nazi party came to power, a great deal of surrealistic or otherwise unapproved art was burned.

Recognizing the power of art, authoritarian governments also produced it. They sponsored art celebrating modernity, organization, and obedience. One of the most important was probably Triumph of the Will, a film about Adolf Hitler made by German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl in 1935—still in the early years of this art form. It was a two-hour propaganda piece meant to show how the German people should celebrate Adolf Hitler as a man of action.

The war itself also led to an abundance of art. Some of it was overtly racist, like many anti-Japanese pieces in the United States. Other countries also created a great deal of propaganda in the territories they took over or were trying to take over. They hoped the art would convince populations to help them or to obey their rule. One great example is this Japanese leaflet from 1946. It is meant to convince Indian citizens not to join up to fight Japan.
A 1935 movie poster of Triumph of the Will. © Getty.

The war also saw the theft of many works of art. German forces, in particular, took art both from conquered countries and from groups, such as the Jewish population, whose property was stolen before they were murdered. After the war, many efforts were made to recover this art, but only some were successful.

**Post-war art**

In the United States and some other countries, the end of the war in 1945 transformed who could make art. Previously, it had not been a career many people could afford to pursue. But the GI Bill, which paid for veterans to go to university, vastly widened the talent pool for students of art and other disciplines. The “democratization” of art spawned many new types of creativity. Together with the rise of consumer culture, this created “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? Perhaps no other piece of art so deftly exemplifies this movement than Andy Warhol’s *32 Campbell’s Soup Cans*, which made art from an everyday product. Can’t tell if it’s really art? That’s exactly what Warhol hoped you would think about!


Meanwhile, in China, the victory of the Communist Party brought to power not only a new government but also a new idea 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 deemed not useful, especially European and US movements like Surrealism and pop art, was outlawed. Historic, centuries-old Chinese art from earlier dynasties was even destroyed in the Cultural Revolution of the 60s and 70s. The only art endorsed by the government was very realistic, pro-communist, pro-government work like this painting.
Finally, as the end of the war laid the groundwork for decolonization, art aimed at liberation began to emerge around the world, both in colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean and in US society where Chicano muralism and Black Power art flourished. We will leave you with one example, Sudanese artist Ibrahim El Salahi’s *The Arising.*
Sources

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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.

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Norman Lindsay, *The Trumpet Calls, 1917*. © Universal History Archive / Getty Images.
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