

12-18-2014

# Art of the Great War

Zack Deyoung  
*Ouachita Baptist University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Deyoung, Zack, "Art of the Great War" (2014). *History Class Publications*. 41.  
<https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/history/41>

This Class Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Class Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact [mortensona@obu.edu](mailto:mortensona@obu.edu).

Zack DeYoung

Dr. Hicks

World at War

18 December 2014

### Art of the Great War

World War One was a major turning point in the history of the world. War advancements had created a monster that no one was ready for. No longer was war seen as glorious, but instead horrifying. Often, the world sees the war from an outside perspective understanding that it was a great tragedy, but they do not understand it from a personal level. Many historians have tried to accomplish this through interviews with the survivors, writing biographies, excavating battle grounds, and various other methods. One method, which is often times overlooked, is viewing the war through the lens of the art pieces produced from it. Some may believe that this is trivial when studying the war but the opposite is true. Art is a reflection of one's very self; there are few other methods quite as personal as viewing art. Too often have historians looked over these pieces believing them to hold no importance in the historical field of study, to the point that only recently has this part of the war been seriously studied.<sup>1</sup> This paper attempts to give one a personal look into World War One through the poetry of the time and art produced by the soldiers and others tied to the war that is now referred to as "trench art".

The term "trench art" is derived from World War One art pieces created by soldiers and even some civilians. While some pieces were actually created in the trenches, most art work at this time was created while outside the trenches, and World War One is known for its implementation of the new war strategy known as trench warfare. The term stuck and is used to

---

<sup>1</sup> Whittingham, Clare. "Mnemonics for War: Trench Art and the Reconciliation of Public and Private Memory." *Past Imperfect* 14 (2008): 86-119. <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/pi/article/view/4226>.

not only describe art from World War One, but any soldier created art piece in earlier and later wars as well. A simple definition of trench art is "Any object made by soldiers, prisoners of war and civilians, from war material, as long as the object and the maker are associated in time and space with an armed conflict or its consequences."<sup>2</sup>

These pieces of art were not necessarily paintings or drawings, though some did exist. Most art work was actually created using the various materials they had around them, such as bullet casings, food cans, match boxes, weapons, helmets, and almost anything they could get their hands on. Trench art during the Great War can for the most part be placed into a few different categories such as the following: objects collected by soldiers from the battlefield and crafted in way so to produce a war memento, handcrafted pieces created by soldiers and sent home to families, pieces created by soldiers or civilians in order to sell or barter to others, pieces created by prisoners of war and traded for food, money, cigarettes, etc., pieces created by soldiers seeking some way to ease the crippling feeling of boredom, post-war creation by ex-soldiers or civilians to sale as souvenirs to people such as tourists, and manufactured pieces that are essentially mock trench art pieces.<sup>3</sup> The type that is most important and most interesting when studying World War One is the pieces made by the soldiers during the war or directly after.

It is said from the point of view of many of those who have been through the fires of war that war consists of "80% boredom, 15% exhaustion, and 5% pure terror". This being the case, many soldiers had to find a way to break the incessant boredom that ate away at them with

---

<sup>2</sup> "About Trench Art." Trench Art.Net. January 1, 2014. Accessed November 18, 2014. [http://trenchart.net/About\\_Trench\\_Art.html](http://trenchart.net/About_Trench_Art.html).

<sup>3</sup> Kimball, Jane A. "Trench Art of the Great War." In *Trench Art: An Illustrated History.*, Davis, CA.: Silverpenny Press, 2004.

something, and for several soldiers that thing was crafting art pieces.<sup>4</sup> The question is why were these important? Was it simply entertainment? The simple answer is they were so much more than just entertainment; they were much more personal and valuable.

As previously mentioned trench art can be split into several different categories; these categories in themselves reveal that trench art had many uses. These pieces held great value to soldiers not only financially, but emotionally as well. Looking at the financial side, soldiers saw these items as almost a luxury item, a term that most soldiers would have been unfamiliar with while in the midst of war; that being the case, the ones who had the skills to create these items created a form of currency. Soldiers who wanted something to remember the war by or as a gift to their family may trade other items such as money, food, or cigarettes (which is about as close to a luxury item as most soldiers received). These went even further than just the battlefield however, because they were also used in trading with civilians for money or goods as well. These became a huge financial benefit to Allied European armies when the U.S. soldiers first came into the scene. Many of them had a lot more money on them than the other soldiers already there, and the Americans were so amazed by the art that they spent a good amount of money on various pieces for themselves or for family, which greatly helped out several of those European soldiers. It even transferred into prison camps, which is not a place most people would expect art to come from. Prisoners of war in several camps were given a surprising amount of freedom in creating art pieces, so much so that many of the camps established craft programs for the prisoners. These pieces were used in similar ways as they were on the battlefield in the

---

<sup>4</sup> "About Trench Art." Trench Art.Net. January 1, 2014. Accessed November 18, 2014. [http://trenchart.net/About\\_Trench\\_Art.html](http://trenchart.net/About_Trench_Art.html).

camps. They were traded and sold to other prisoners as well as the prison guards, again for money or goods. These become almost a form of currency between camps as well.<sup>5</sup>

Trench art obviously had a lot of value in a financial sense, but they had value in another way as well, one that often times is over looked. These pieces, for some, were an extension of themselves. This can be seen more so in poetry where a soldier pours himself out into words on a page, but it is not always as easy to see in trench art. These pieces gave many soldiers something to have pride in when everything around them seemed so bleak and at times, pointless. Also, many soldiers would create pieces that would relate to their families and friends back home, creating a piece that helped remind them what they were fighting for and why they needed to make it through. These pieces essentially became beacons of hope when things seemed utterly hopeless around them. When soldiers had to witness the destruction of their comrades and friends, life could become very hard to bare. Having that reminder that there is a constant in their life waiting for them back home could become extremely important to them in the same way that letters from home did for others. Having these pieces served as almost a form of teddy bear that provided them some sense of comfort to hold on to; to the point for some that they would kill in order to hold on to it.

As mentioned earlier, some trench art was actually made after the events of the war, which often times became souvenirs for tourists and enthusiasts. After the war there was a high demands for these pieces, and in order to meet demand not only were pieces made during the war sold, but many recreations made by ex-soldiers or civilians which were considered to be authentic pieces were sold. The list of the types of art pieces created goes on and on, but easily the most widely created piece was art created using a bullet casing. Bullet casings, would have

---

<sup>5</sup> Kimball, Jane A. "Trench Art of the Great War." In *Trench Art: An Illustrated History.*, Davis, CA.: Silverpenny Press, 2004.

been one of the most prominent resources for creation for soldiers. Bullet casings were everywhere on the battlefield and very easy to obtain, while also being made out of brass, which can be easily manipulated when heated. These pieces are absolutely astounding to look at. The craftsmanship of so many of these pieces is incredible. But trench art was not purely limited to small objects such as these casings. There are some beautiful large pieces as well such as model planes, battleships, and other vehicles, all made out of salvaged materials, which is what makes these pieces so special. Unfortunately many of these wonders have been either destroyed during or after the war, were lost during the war, or were condemned to the unknown depths of a basement, and a large percentage of pieces remain a mystery as to who to credit as the artist. Most pieces are anonymous for a variety of reasons such as the fact that many did not think to put their name on the piece, many were created to either be traded away or sent to family without feeling the need to sign it, and many others still wanted to remain anonymous for safety concerns. Many objects that were deemed government property were torn apart and used as raw material for these creations and to avoid any potential reprimand later on; they avoided providing the government with a way to connect them to the piece if that came up.<sup>6</sup>

As beautiful as trench art is, it can be hard to understand the inspiration the artist had for the piece or the importance of that specific piece to a certain individual. However, when looking at poetry one can more easily understand the person behind it and see that person poured out on a page, which in itself is a very beautiful piece of artwork. Poetry is one of the best ways to get to understand a person; like trench art it is an extension of oneself, but one that is more relatable to other people, and it is easier to grasp the meanings behind them for the most part. It is also valuable to look at the differences between poetry from the beginning of the war and towards the

---

<sup>6</sup> Kimball, Jane A. "Trench Art of the Great War." In *Trench Art: An Illustrated History.*, Davis, CA.: Silverpenny Press, 2004.

end of the war, as it provides a look into the attitude of not only the individual at the time, but others who were with that person, giving us some insight as to how and what people thought about their current situation in the world.

World War One has the unique distinction for producing several poems, and bringing into popularity “war poets” as they are called, who often times were either soldiers or someone who was closely involved with war, but may have not necessarily fought, such as a close family member, nurse, or even a civilian who closely follows the events.

It is interesting to see the different types of poetry that arose from this time period and how it changed during the entirety of the war; many early poems focused on primarily themes of glory, honor, duty, and heroism, with the occasional pessimistic poem here and there (which honestly seemed to fit the future of the war pretty well), while late into the war and directly after one will notice many more themes of realism, dark irony, and depression.<sup>7</sup>

A good example of the style of the early poetry (1914) is represented in the poem “For the Fallen” by Laurence Binyon. The first section of this poem says

“With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,  
 England mourns for her dead across the sea.  
 Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,  
 Fallen in the cause of the free.”

This description of the deceased English soldiers has a very romanticized and patriotic feel to it, which was how much of the world viewed war at the time. It was often times seen as a path to glory and fame, and the ultimate act of heroic patriotism. Binyon was a British academic and poet who worked for the Red Cross in World War One and never saw the front lines of battle

---

<sup>7</sup> Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. "The Poetry of WWI." Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed November 18, 2014.

until 1916. He was one of the many who were blinded by the past thoughts of war. His works reflects the beliefs that were still strong within the civilian population at this time.<sup>8</sup>

This grandiose idea of war quickly faded by the end of the war, and interestingly enough some early poets did not buy into this idea and had a much more negative outlook on what the future held. An excellent example of this the poem “Joining the Colours” by Katherine Tynan which starts by saying

“There they go marching all in step so gay!  
Smooth-cheeked and golden, food for shells and guns.  
Blithely they go as to a wedding day,  
The mothers' sons.”

This is a very dark view of what is to come of the soldiers heading into battle, it even goes on to talk about how the sendoff from the girls is pointless because love cannot save them. As dark as this is, it is unnervingly accurate. Tynan’s is an understandable point of view coming from a woman who is helplessly watching her two sons going off to war.<sup>9</sup>

Continuing on to the years 1915-1916 there is a much greater mixture of positive and negative poetry whereas previously there was an abundance of positive poetry that overshadowed the negative poetry, for the most part. Death becomes an even more prevalent theme than previously, and it is not looked upon the same way as most of the poems about death previously did. There were still some poems here and there that put death in a patriotic light such as the very famous poem “In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae. It is written in a way that is supposed to represent the dead’s perspective. It essentially says that the dead are calling their

---

<sup>8</sup> Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. "Laurence Binyon." Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed December 17, 2014. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/laurence-binyon>.

<sup>9</sup> Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. "Katharine Tynan." Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed December 17, 2014. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/laurence-binyon>.



former comrades to pick up from where they fell and to finish the fight for their sake. This is the call for soldiers to not let their comrades' deaths be in vain. This has both positive and negative connotations to it, because McCrae is a former veteran from a time when war was glorious; however, this was written after the death of a close friend while tending to the injured in 1915. This poem is as much a battle cry as it is an outrage against the war that took his friend.<sup>10</sup>

“The Death Bed” by Siegfried Sassoon shows death in the war in a more negative light. The poem is about a young soldier who has been mortally wounded and on his death bed is struggling to hold on and is in tremendous pain. Then Death came towards him and the man at his side begs,

“He's young; he hated war; how should he die  
When cruel old campaigners win safe through?”  
But death replied: “I choose him.” So he went,  
And there was silence in the summer night;  
Silence and safety; and the veils of sleep.  
Then, far away, the thudding of the guns.”

This poem represents the unfairness of the war as it takes the life of this seemingly innocent young soldier who never wanted to be involved in the first place. It also gives off the vibe that the sacrifice of this young soldier did absolutely nothing in affecting the tide of the war, when reading the last line; “Then, far, away the thudding of the guns”. This shows that the war continues on and his death was meaningless. The author, Sassoon, was a soldier who wrote very descriptive poems about the horrors of war, especially trench warfare, and eventually refused to continue fighting. He was a huge critic of politicians and churchmen for their unquestioning

---

<sup>10</sup> Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. “John McCrae.” Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed December 17, 2014. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/laurence-binyon>.

support of war; he himself saw the war in the light of soldiers being pawns in the hands of those in power. This perspective is very clearly represented in his poetry.<sup>11</sup>

Towards the end of the war the majority of poetry written was, as mentioned, in a very realistic or pessimistic light. The glorification of war was a thing of the past (with the exception of a few groups, but most of those even lost that belief after World War Two) and the late Great War poetry reflected that.

When looking for an example of the realism that protruded into the later war poetry, look no further than Wilfrid Wilson Gibson's "Breakfast".

"We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,  
Because the shells were screeching overhead.  
  
I bet a rasher to a loaf of bread  
That Hull United would beat Halifax  
When Jimmy Stainthorpe played full-back instead  
of Billy Bradford. Ginger raised his head  
And cursed, and took the bet; and dropt back dead.  
  
We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,  
Because the shells were screeching overhead."

This poem will make any reader feel extremely uneasy, because of the brutal realism in this short poem. It shows just how quickly and unexpected death came to soldiers and how it became just a normal occurrence, one that others became disturbingly callous to. This is not a poem that would have ever appeared previous to this war, and it was not the only one at this time to be

---

<sup>11</sup> Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. "Siegfried Sassoon." Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed December 17, 2014. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/laurence-binyon>.

written in this style, either. This is one of the many poems that contributed to the beginnings of the Modernist poetry movement.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the poem “God! How I hate you, you young cheerful men” by Arthur Graeme West is about as pessimistic as it gets. This poem is taken out of West’s diary, which was taken and published posthumously as *The Diary of a Dead Officer*. In the poem West reveals his utter hatred of war and all that goes along with it. He starts off by saying how much he hates those poets who try and put war into a positive light and calls them all fools. He goes on to describe various horrors of war in a very gruesome fashion, while also ranting against God. West is a strong atheist and essentially mocks those who talk of God being a loving and caring God, by saying that God just lets this mass killing go on while commanding men hold on to faith while

“...God Himself does seem to walk  
The bloody fields of Flanders He so loves!”

Interestingly enough West initially signed up to go to war, and like many others like him, believed in the greatness of war and even God, but after experiencing the horrors of war lost both of those beliefs. The loss of belief, at least in war, is right in line with much of the general population at the time.<sup>13</sup>

Looking at art from this time is a great way at getting insight into the war at a more personal level, and these can be used many times to understand popular ideologies of the time. However, even with that being the case, there have been some arguments against the use of some pieces in trying to understand the past. A BBC article titled “Has poetry distorted our view of World War One” talks about the war poet Wilfred Owen who is considered by many the greatest

<sup>12</sup> Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. “Wilfred Wilson Gibson.” Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed December 17, 2014. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/laurence-binyon>.

<sup>13</sup> Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. “Arthur Graeme West.” Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed December 17, 2014. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/laurence-binyon>.

of World War One poets. Owen was a young man who joined the war after feeling guilty for standing by and not signing up. He was thrown right in the middle of things and experienced the horrors of war and the trenches firsthand. He himself suffered through being blown up, concussed, and shell-shocked. While in a hospital he met up with war poet Siegfried Sassoon, who inspired him to write poetry, which he did so and based it on his own experiences. His writings were a great way to help him recover from shell shock, and just as a way to comfort himself while going through the war. Unfortunately he was shot and killed in battle in 1918 towards the end of the war.<sup>14</sup> The BBC article argues that the world places too much of its understanding of World War One on poetry, especially Wilfred Owens. The reason they claim this is that Owen's works for example were fiction even though it was based on his experiences and represented what his experience felt like in the war. The article says that his experience was just one of thousands and that historians cannot base their understanding on a handful of poets' written works based on their experiences. There is some truth to this, seeing as reading a poem is viewing a situation through another's bias.<sup>15</sup> Though this is true, they are missing the point. Yes it is important to understand history for what it was without bias, however this article is an example of a terrifying and growing trend in certain fields of history in which historians study the past while eliminating the human element of the past to try and see it as it was. The issue is taking away the human element of the past is essentially taking the sweetening agent out of a cake. Nothing in the past would have happened the way it did if it was not for the humans who were involved. Understanding the people and where they come from opens up so much in trying

---

<sup>14</sup> "Wilfred Owen: Greatest of the War Poets Who Have Written in the English Language." The War Poetry Website. January 1, 2011. Accessed November 18, 2014. <http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/Owena.html>.

<sup>15</sup> McMillan, Ian. "Has Poetry Distorted Our View of World War One?" BBC. January 1, 2014. Accessed November 18, 2014. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z38rq6f>.

to understand why they did what they did, and understand what made the past play out in the way that it did. Understanding the events of World War One is one thing, but viewing it from the very personal perspective of an individual is when history is brought to life, and that is when history matters. That is why art is so incredibly valuable; it allows us to understand the war at a level previously unknown. It is a direct connection to the very mind of the artist, and through that, a new realm of history opens up that, if left out of the picture, hinders one's true understanding of the past.

Art has been and always will be an expression of oneself or their surroundings, and provides great insight into the minds of the artist and a look into the culture from where it originated, and World War One art is no exception. For these soldiers, art had so many different meanings to different people. Art was money, memories, emotions, therapy, comfort, a connection to their fleeting humanity, a representation of their very selves. That is not something that can just be ignored. Art is one of the few things that give us a personal and relatable connection to the past in a way that nothing else does. If the human aspect of the past is taken away, then the study of history would be pointless, which is why the history community needs to continue forward in their study of the past through the eyes of the people that made it happen.

## Works Cited

### Primary Sources

**Online Poetry Archive**-combination of multiple primary and secondary material.

Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. "The Poetry of WWI." Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed October 28, 2014. [www.poetryfoundation.org/article/248460](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/248460).

**Trench Art Book**-combination of multiple primary and secondary material.

Kimball, Jane A. "Trench Art of the Great War." In *Trench Art: An Illustrated History*., Davis, CA.: Silverpenny Press, 2004.

### Secondary Sources

#### Bibliographies

Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. "Arthur Graeme West." Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed December 17, 2014. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/arthur-graeme-west>.

Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. "John McCrae." Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed December 17, 2014. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-mccrae>.

Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. "Katharine Tynan." Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed December 17, 2014. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/katharine-tynan>.

Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. "Laurence Binyon." Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed December 17, 2014. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/laurence-binyon>.

Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. "Siegfried Sassoon." Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed December 17, 2014.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/siegfried-sassoon>.

Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute. "Wilfred Wilson Gibson." Poetry Foundation. January 1, 2014. Accessed December 17, 2014.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/wilfred-wilson-gibson>.

### **Journal**

Whittingham, Clare. "Mnemonics for War: Trench Art and the Reconciliation of Public and Private Memory." *Past Imperfect* 14 (2008): 86-119.

<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/pi/article/view/4226>.

### **Article**

McMillan, Ian. "Has Poetry Distorted Our View of World War One?" BBC. January 1, 2014. Accessed November 18, 2014. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z38rq6f>.

### **Websites**

"About Trench Art." Trench Art.Net. January 1, 2014. Accessed November 18, 2014.

[http://trenchart.net/About\\_Trench\\_Art.html](http://trenchart.net/About_Trench_Art.html).

"Wilfred Owen: Greatest of the War Poets Who Have Written in the English Language."

The War Poetry Website. January 1, 2011. Accessed November 18, 2014.

<http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/Owena.html>.