

Lucky Charms: Superstition in World War I

Many soldiers carried lucky charms while they experienced the dangerous conditions of the Western Front, in the hope that these would help them avoid injury or death.

Some objects were considered lucky because of how they were acquired, whereas others took the form of traditional symbols of good luck, like a shamrock or horseshoe.

This activity is designed for younger pupils (First and Second Level) to explore through creative play how people in the past invested meaning into objects.

Set the Scene

- Why did soldiers carry lucky charms?
- What was significant about lucky charms and which one were most popular among soldiers?

Many soldiers carried lucky charms. A charm could provide comfort to the soldier carrying it. In the dangerous conditions of the Western Front, some men carried charms for protection, in the hope that these would help them avoid injury or death. A charm could offer people some hope in circumstances that were otherwise out of their control.

Some objects were considered lucky because of how they were acquired. For example, Rifleman W S Main was carrying a cigarette case when he was struck by a shell fragment during the war (IMG_1). The case bore the brunt of the projectile's force and prevented Main from being seriously injured, so he believed it had protected him. Other charms took the form of traditional symbols of good luck, like a horseshoe or shamrock (IMG_2).

Other mascots could be more abstract. For example, 'fumsups' were charms in the form of a small person or baby, usually with a wooden head (because of the luck associated with touching wood) and metal body (IMG_3). This type of charm started to become popular in the Victorian era and was at its height of popularity during the First World War. The name derives from 'thumbs up', a traditional good luck symbol. Fumsups were often accompanied by a poem explaining their good luck properties:

My head is made
Of wood most rare
My thumbs turn up
To touch me there.
To speed my feet
They've Cupid's wings
They'll help true love
'Mongst other things.
Proverbial is
My power to bring
Good luck to you
In everything.

I'll bring good luck
To all away
Just send me to
A friend to-day.

In 1915 tiny, pocket-sized bears manufactured by toy companies became popular lucky charms. People gave these bears to their loved ones, who carried them to the front lines. The bears' eyes were set high in their foreheads so they could peep out of soldiers' pockets.

First and Second Level

Tasks

1. Show the pupils historical photographs of lucky charms that soldier had with them in the trenches (IMG1 to IMG3). Ask them to think of what lucky charm they would like if they had to be away from home.
2. Ask the pupils to make a lucky charm. It can be a traditional symbol of good luck or an object that has special meaning to them. Pupils can use clay and decorate the clay with toothpicks or other tools or with beads. To make an amulet, a paperclip or pipe cleaner bent into a U shape can be pushed into the clay until only a small loop juts out. Pat the clay around the paper clip.
3. Pupils present their lucky charm to the rest of the class. They may wish to tell the class what the object is and why they chose it.

Curriculum Experiences & Outcomes

Inspired by a range of stimuli, I can express and communicate my ideas, thoughts and feelings through activities within art and design. **EXA 0-05a / EXA 1-05a/ EXA 2-05a**

First Level

I have the opportunity to choose and explore a range of media and technologies to create images and objects, discovering their effects and suitability for specific tasks. **EXA 1-02a**

Core Skills

- Thinking
- Communication
- Working with others

Second Level

I have the opportunity to choose and explore a range of media and technologies to create images and objects, discovering their effects and suitability for specific tasks. **EXA 2-02a**

Approaches & Methods

- Creative learning
- Play-based learning

Materials & Resources

Lucky Charms IMG 1 Rifleman W S Main was carrying this cigarette case when he was struck by a shell fragment during the war. The case bore the brunt of the projectile's force and prevented Main from being seriously injured. He survived his injuries and eventually returned to active service (© IWM (EPH 3464).

Lucky Charms IMG 2 A shamrock made from Connemara marble. It has a hole in the top, so it could have been worn on a cord or chain around the neck (© IWM (EPH 3464).

Lucky Charms IMG 3 Two WW-era 'fumsups'.

Lucky Charms IMG 3 Two pocket bears.