

# Trench Art: Passing Time, Crafting History

The term 'trench art' covers a vast range of decorative items that were made during or soon after the First World War. Most pieces of trench art were made from by-products of the war - discarded items such as ammunition shell cases, bullet casings, shrapnel, and even pieces of destroyed buildings or downed planes. Many pieces were produced by servicemen to pass the time when they were away from the front lines. Others were created by soldiers in hospitals, prisoners of war, internees and civilians.

Everyday items were crafted into pieces of art which could be traded, sold, kept as souvenirs or sent to family members. The production of trench art also continued after the war, providing souvenirs for pilgrims and visitors to the battlefields.

This resource explores how people in the past used art to support their wellbeing, communicate ideas and entertain. It is designed to develop communication and thinking skills, encouraging pupils to use creative play to make their own trench art by recycling various objects and/or materials.

## Set the Scene

### What is trench art?

All the objects are made from by-products and debris of war- the stuff left behind after battles. Trench art was often made from shell casings, bullets or shrapnel balls, which were readily available in war-torn areas.

### Who made trench art?

#### Soldiers (Trench Art IMG1-5)

Although many objects were made by soldiers, most pieces of trench art were designed and created behind the front lines by soldiers on reserve in army bases. Specialist equipment was available there in blacksmiths' and engineers' workshops and the men had enough spare time to make intricate and finely decorated items.

#### Prisoners of war (Trench Art IMG6-7)

Producing trench art in prisoner of war camps not only helped inmates pass the time but also produced a commodity which could be traded for high value items, such as food or cigarettes. Many prisoners of war had been craftsmen before they had been called up for service, so the pieces they made were often of very high quality. Prisoners could either make things on commission for other people or produce pieces from available materials in order to trade them. The items were often sent back home to family members as souvenirs.

#### Civilians (Trench Art IMG8)

In areas devastated by war, the leftovers of battles provided useful resource material for local civilians. Some items were sold to soldiers as tokens and curios to send back home. After the war, mass-produced items were sold to tourists visiting former battlefields. Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference

between trench art made by soldiers and pieces that were commercially produced by civilians. Some commercial souvenirs, like the item shown in image 8, combined war material such as bullet casings with factory-produced elements.

### **Injured and recovering soldiers** (Trench Art IMG9)

Soldiers in hospital were often encouraged to produce pieces of trench art as a form of occupational therapy, as meaningful work could be physically and psychologically beneficial for trauma patients. Patients could also learn basket weaving and painting and, if they were physically able, heavier skills like woodwork and welding. The items they produced could be sold to the public and provide a way for soldiers to support themselves.

## First and Second Level

### Tasks

1. Create your own trench art.

Soldiers created art from discarded material they found around them. Ask the pupils to bring in trash that they would usually put into recycling (such as old milk cartons, cans and jars) and work individually or in small groups to make them into useful, decorative objects. For example, plastic bottles can be made into flower vases, tin cans into bird feeders and juice cartons into pencil holders). Ask the pupils to share their creation with the rest of the class by showing and telling what the object is and what it is made of.

2. Create your own trench art helmet.

Soldiers decorated their helmets for camouflage or as keepsakes, to help them remember a specific battle or place. Pupils can use paper bowls as helmets and decorate them using paint. Trench Art IMG10-13 might provide inspiration.

## Curriculum Experiences & Outcomes

### First

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**

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 Skills
- Communication
- Working together

### Second

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**

### Approaches & Methods

- Creative learning
- Play-based learning

## Materials & Resources

**Trench Art IMG1** Ring made from recycled brass inscribed with the word 'Ypres'. © IWM (EPH 5916)

**Trench Art IMG2** Decorated shell cases are the most common examples of trench art. The design for this one was taken from a stencil, which was purchased from a Belgian soldier for five Woodbine cigarettes. The design was transferred to the shell case using iodine. A bent nail was then employed to engrave the design into the metal. On returning to the UK, the shell cases were polished and lacquered and they adorned the owner's mantelpiece for 60 years. © IWM (EPH 3296)

**Trench Art IMG3** This is a Turkish projectile that was removed from a soldier's knee cap at Gallipoli. He kept it as a souvenir and had it converted into a pendant. ©National Army Museum, Waiouru, New Zealand

**Trench Art IMG4** This ashtray is made out of a Mills 36M grenade. A section of the casing has been cut away and the body of the grenade provides the bowl to collect the ash. ©National Army Museum, Waiouru, New Zealand

**Trench Art IMG5** This wooden model of a British Whippet tank was made by men of the Chinese Labour Corps. Around 95,000 Chinese were recruited by Britain to work under contract on the Western Front during the First World War. Many of them were skilled craftsmen and the pieces of trench art they made are relatively common finds. © IWM (EPH 2166)

**Trench Art IMG6** This beaded lizard is a souvenir, brought home by a New Zealand nurse during World War I. It was made by a prisoner of war from the Ottoman Empire. ©National Army Museum, Waiouru, New Zealand

**Trench Art IMG7** A tobacco pot made from a German cartridge case and decorated by a Turkish prisoner of war. The pot is inlaid with three different coloured metals to create a pattern of stylised animals or birds with blocks of Arabic text. On the base of the pot are the original manufacturing marks for the armament factory which produced the cartridge, 'PATRONENFABRIK KARLSRUHE, OKT 1914', and an Arabic number. © IWM (EPH 3245)

**Trench Art IMG8** This crucifix is made from a hybrid of British .303 inch cartridge cases and French 8mm bullets. The design and inclusion of the mass-produced Christ figure suggest that this is an example of a commercially produced piece of trench art, possibly sold to battlefield tourists after the war. © IWM (EPH 1915)

**Trench Art IMG9** An altar frontal piece that was hand-embroidered by 133 soldiers from the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa as they recovered from their injuries in British hospitals during World War I. They embroidered sections of five panels, which were then stitched together by experts at the Royal School of Needlework.

**Trench Art IMG10** A German Army steel helmet, painted externally in segments of red-brown, light-green and dark yellow camouflage, all outlined with a black border. © IWM (UNI 8312)

**Trench Art IMG11** A German Army steel helmet, painted in an improvised block pattern of camouflage. © IWM (UNI 12639)

**Trench Art IMG12** An American Army helmet, painted with a map of the Western Front. © Veterans' Memorial Hall, Duluth, MN

**Trench Art IMG13** An example of a decorated helmet.