War and Art: An Analysis of Artistic Expression During the First World War

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1 Introduction

Art has always been a tool of expression when it comes to presenting ideas and concepts. Few disciplines have the ability to convey messages and symbolize ideas in a visual manner similar to art. The rather abstract nature of this subject allows for the presentation of factors that cannot be observed through other means. At its core, using materials such as ink and paint to create meaningful depictions is the very essence of artistic work. In part due to its visual nature, art can serve as a form of narration. It can capture a moment in time, while also reflecting on the experiences and emotions of the artist.

As most may already know, the First World War (1914-1918) is recognized as one of the most consequential conflicts in history as a result of its extensive scale and magnitude. World War I was the first conflict of its kind to employ the widespread use of machine warfare. The resulting clashes drew in forces from across the world as a consequence of the overlapping systems of alliances that linked together different nations. When events such as these are taught in history, it is always done so through a political lens. Individuals become familiar with different leaders, powers, and nationalist interests. Building off of this information, this study examines war from a different perspective. This study aims to explore the influence of war on art and how wartime art was shaped by the thoughts and lives of those involved in the conflict. The general hypothesis for this study is that art from the time period can reflect people’s emotions by using illustrations that would focus on the death caused by the
war. Through art, researchers can observe the views of those caught up in the war, those who were most vulnerable to the devastation of the conflict.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Artists Respond to the War

In terms of visual style, a variety of responses could be seen in wartime art. These responses were often reflected in the themes, depictions, and symbols that were present in the art pieces. There have been a few key studies that have focused on researching the messages behind wartime paintings and sketches, including an analysis conducted by curator and art historian Charlotte Hopson. In her study, “Responding to War: British Artists and WWI” Hopson analyzes artists’ reflections on industrial warfare. Hopson’s study states that the widespread use of machine warfare was a major factor that influenced the attitudes and works of artists. For artists, the destruction caused by machine warfare symbolized the dehumanizing nature of war- a reality shaped by death and bloodshed. The machine became an artistic symbol, one that showed the destructive potential of industrial progress. Many artists likely felt a new moral responsibility to convey the horrors of conflict. Depictions of technology, weapons, and battles became lifeless, dull, and bleak. Newer art styles strayed far from glorifying the battlefields. Instead, new modernist and futurist art styles illustrated war as a mechanized mass in which the value of the individual became forgotten. Humanity was symbolized as a “victim of the machine” [1].

2.2 Significance of Soldier-Produced Artworks

Art pieces can aid in adding a visual representation to the emotions and experiences of those caught amidst the conflict. Pieces created by soldiers and those on the front lines can be especially meaningful. Research conducted by historian Tim Clarke explains the significance of soldier-produced artworks. Clarke emphasizes the need to explore more unofficial artworks in order to have a better narrative surrounding the experiences of the soldiers. Such artworks help provide new perspectives and insight. Work that is created by soldiers provides a view into the “first-order” of memory, meaning that the piece is representative of the soldier’s actual experiences [2]. In short, soldier-produced artworks are direct recreations of their memories and experiences. From the soldier’s
perspective, creating art allows them to express their emotions and feel a sense of individuality in an otherwise homogeneous-looking battlefield. Clarke argues that relying solely on postwar art prevents places focused on a “distanced memorialization” of the events rather than the understanding of “lived experiences” (Clarke, 2018, p. 10-11). Studying art closely associated with combat will allow researchers to define the actual experiences of conflict rather than just memories of those experiences. The analysis implies that focusing on the soldiers and those in the center of the conflict may shift historical narratives, but that should be embraced. In order to comprehend everything about the war, it is necessary to focus on not only the causes and outcome of the conflict but also the stories of “those who fought in the war, even if it does not fit into neat narratives” [2].

2.3 The Visual Style of Otto Dix

Throughout the war, there have been various artists whose works embodied the destruction and trauma of the conflicts. One such artist is Otto Dix, a German soldier-artist, whose works have been the center of multiple studies. Dix served in the artillery regiment of the German army for all four years of World War I, even earning the Iron Cross award for his service. A detailed analysis created by historian Ann Murray discusses the visual style of Otto Dix and his representation of the war experience. Dix’s art served as a stark contrast to the traditional heroic, romanticized, and glorified styles of war art. His works challenged “the mythologizing of the war” that was common in Germany at the time [3]. According to Murray, Dix’s paintings communicated “the reality of trench warfare”, exposing the trauma and mental damage of conflict using violent, gory, and grotesque demonstrations [3]. His paintings often featured hyper-realistic depictions of dead bodies, decomposing corpses, disfigured remains, and blood. In the analysis, Murray explains that one of Dix’s motives could have been to “counteract the doubt attached to war trauma as a legitimate illness” by turning his personal experience into visual demonstrations [3]. His works became representations of his personal trauma and mental anguish from his time on the front lines. Murray’s analysis also reflects the conclusions of Hopson’s study, mentioned earlier. Namely, as the war progressed, artists emphasized the increasingly violent and dehumanizing nature of war, which can clearly be seen in Dix’s often grotesque illustrations. As stated in Hopson’s study, these representations can be connected to the increasingly destructive nature of newer weapons and machines.
2.4 Eyewitness Testimony and War Art

The usefulness of art as a historical tool is in part due to its ability to express what words alone cannot. However, how the conflict is interpreted is often influenced by the manner in which the painting was created. In her article, “‘Accurate to the Point of Mania’: Eyewitness Testimony and Memory Making in Australia’s Official Paintings of the First World War,” historian Margaret Hutchison explores the role of eyewitness testimony in the production and interpretation of art. Similar to Clarke’s research, Hutchison’s paper also provides some perspective on art that showcases the soldier’s point of view. However, instead of directly studying soldier-produced art, Hutchison takes a look at this point of view from a different factor. During the war, many artists were hired to go to the war front and capture what they saw in their art. In paintings created after the war, eyewitness testimony became a crucial part of the creation process. Soldiers and veterans were often asked to speak with artists about a certain scene or event from during the war. According to Hutchison, eyewitness testimony from soldiers did help to provide factual accuracy in terms of the events, however, issues appeared when a soldier’s accounts clashed with an artist’s vision. Art was subjective and, to a certain extent, biased, meaning that people have had different interpretations of the same event and that one’s personal recollections could have been interpreted differently by others. An eyewitness account could be visualized in different ways by different artists, resulting in questions surrounding the factual accuracy of an artwork. Hutchison explains how in some cases, “the process of translating eyewitness testimony into paint” resulted in a loss of artistic quality [4]. When relying solely on accuracy, a painting may lose its intensity, drama, and boldness. The question of whether such a representation, one that relied solely on memory, could effectively reconstruct the memory of an event played a key role in shaping the artistic interpretations of the war [4].

3 Methods

As a result of the abstract nature of this topic, the methods of this study primarily revolved around observational and content analysis. The research was conducted by collecting images of various paintings, sketches, and drawings created around the time of World War I. This study particularly focused on art pieces dating from the duration of the first World War up until the early 1920s.
Covering this time period allowed for the analysis of art pieces from both the midst of the conflict and the aftermath. These art pieces were obtained from a variety of online sources including galleries, museum exhibitions, art collections, and archives. Specific artworks chosen from each collection were analyzed based on a few key factors in order to draw out the commonalities and parallels between the different visual works. These connections reflected the collective perspectives of citizens, soldiers, and civilians caught up in the conflict. The research required the analysis of 15 artworks from the given time period. Since the proposed study involved filtering through large amounts of sources, it was crucial to ensure that the pieces chosen for the analysis provided a representative sample of the various groups that participated in the creation of wartime art. Such groups included soldiers, wartime artists, enlisted artists, citizens, war veterans, and full-time artists.

The factors chosen to examine the artworks fell into two broad categories: color scheme and depictions. The first involved inspecting the shades and tones commonly seen in the war art, and their symbolic significance. The repeated use of particular shades across the work of different artists alluded to important emotions or attitudes. Obscured, muted, and dull hues were given particular focus. The second category, holding slightly more weightage, refers to the portrayal of certain scenes, objects, or events. The illustration of blood, corpses, soldiers, conflict, battle scenes, trenches, weaponry, and graves was one of the primary focuses of the research. Any additional recurring depictions that contributed to the overall representation of war-related themes such as destruction, trauma, and loss were utilized to collect information. As a result of the particular data collected during the analysis stage, the study took a slightly literary turn.

In order to aid general understanding, scholarly articles and publications discussing the key works of well-known war artists were also collected. This allowed for some deeper insight to be gained regarding the context for the type of art that was produced. Studying the backgrounds and lives of specific artists helped contribute to a better understanding of the different factors that could impact one’s art. The repetition of common themes in wartime art was often a result of the shared experiences many encountered. Taking these experiences into account was important for drawing connections between the works that were selected for the study.

This study examined the various types of visual artworks created during the war. While paintings remain some of the most well-known forms of visual art
created during the time, other forms were also widely used. Paintings from this period, which were mostly oil or watercolor compositions, made up a significant portion of this research. Sketches were another type of work that were studied, particularly drawings that were made using charcoal, crayons, pastels, or ink. All of the data consisted of digitally copied versions of the original pieces, which were created on canvas, paper, or sketchbooks.

One of the key components of this study was related to the communication of war-related themes through art. As a result of the large scale of the first world war, a significant portion of art reflected the impact of technological warfare and modern conflict. It is these advancements that resulted in the heavy focus on death and damage in the art from this time period. This impact was measured through the visible presence of violent representations. Weapons such as rifles, machine guns, cannons, and tanks have been illustrated repeatedly, along with their effects; namely, pictures of injured soldiers, trampled corpses, dead bodies, graves, and an overwhelming presence of blood. Some indicating factors were needed to highlight the prevalence of such representations and their significance in portraying the perspective of the citizen. In order to break down the visual components of a piece of art, it was necessary to take into account the symbolic role played by different color schemes. At a time when art often served as a narrative tool, colors and shading became key parts of expressing one’s attitudes and emotions. A common trend was observed among war pieces from this time in terms of colors. Colors that can be referred to as being ‘dull’ or ‘muted’ became commonplace. In an artistic sense, muted colors refer to colors with a low saturation; they are defined as being “subdued or grayed” [5]. Dull colors can be described as shades that are lacking in light, brightness, or intensity [6]. Specifically, this study analyzed the significance of shades such as black, white, gray, ash, charcoal, and brown. Based on the subject of the artwork, these colors helped create correlations between otherwise distinct pieces of art.

As touched upon previously, an anticipated challenge of this study was determining which collections or exhibitions to use for the research. There was a wide range of galleries online and it was important to carefully select which ones would be used to collect the data in order to ensure efficiency. Once the collections were chosen, further selection was done to determine which individual pieces would be used from each data set. To choose the galleries and exhibits, factors such as the works featured, the type of artists featured (citizens, recruited artists, soldiers), and the focus of the sets were taken into consideration. To select the individual works, factors such as the date, the scenes depicted, and
the presence of particular themes or objects were implemented, as explained earlier in this section.

4 Findings and Discussion

Various commonalities can be drawn from the art that was observed in the study through the themes and colors that were present in the pieces. The pieces of war art chosen for the study include Rounding up Boche Prisoners by George Mathews Harding, First Aid Station at Seicheprey by Samuel Johnson Woolf, Over the Top by John Nash, The Field of Passchendaele by Paul Nash, Battle of Courcelette by Louis Alexander Weirter, The Taking of Vimy Ridge by Richard Jack, British Tank in Action by Daniel Sherrin, The Trench by Otto Dix, The Tanks at Seishprey by Harvey Dunn, Artillery Battle Verdun by Franz Dudde, Camo 15-Inch Howitzer by F.J Mears, Souvenir Hunters by Frank Crozier, Prisoners Marching Off by Laszlo Mednyanszky, Vindictive at Zeebrugge by Charles John De Lacy, and Out from Battle by Wallace Morgan. The selected pieces were created by artists from various countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, and Hungary.

One of the themes observed in the data collected was the destruction caused by conflict. This theme could be seen through depictions of collapsed structures, broken buildings or objects, and physical damage to architecture, structures, or the natural landscape (see Figures 1, 2, 8, 11). To emphasize the extent of the damage, it was common to see illustrations of people or soldiers passing through destroyed towns or cities, serving as a sort of reminder that these structures were once occupied by people leading their everyday lives. In the background of these visuals stood buildings missing roofs, walls, and doors. The exposed wooden frameworks of these structures were often present towards the center. At the forefront of the piece, viewers would be greeted with images of wooden planks, debris, shattered wood, and other items destroyed beyond identification. Viewers are drawn into the purposefully busy and cluttered style, in which objects are intentionally concealed and lumped, demonstrating the magnitude of the chaos that had just ensued. Themes of destruction went beyond towns.

Paintings of landscapes told similar stories. Scarred landscapes were depicted with stumped trees, dead grass, and endless fields with no greenery in sight. Such landscapes portray the exact opposite of what comes to mind when

\footnote{Refer to Appendix for Figures 1-15}
one thinks of the term field or meadow. These depictions show how the war
affected not only the people themselves but also the lands they inhabited and
the places they resided in.

Unsurprisingly, death and loss became another prevalent theme in art cre-
ated during the war. This could be seen through illustrations of dead bodies,
corpses, trampled soldiers, and explicit representations of dead persons(see Fig-
ures 3, 6-7, 9). Pictures of dead soldiers were placed throughout battlefield
scenes, often being placed in the center of a painting. In many situations, the
bodies of soldiers could be seen blending into the background of the fields or
battlegrounds, informing viewers that all the deaths had become a common
part of the battle scene and that such scenes were to be expected. Corpses became one of the key features of war art, intentionally placed in the eye’s view to emphasize the harsh reality of war. Some paintings portrayed the corpses of individuals as identifiable and separate, while others showed them as unrecognizable piles or disfigured remains. This focus on the general topic of death communicated far-reaching implications. Soldiers went into the war as people, and came out as lifeless corpses. The tides of politics and conflict are always changing, but death is permanent. New alliances could be formed, treaties could be signed, and towns could be rebuilt, but lives could not be brought back. War was always moving forward. New battles ensued every day and, as the hours progressed, soldiers were left behind while more and more blood sunk into the ground. Death was not represented as an abstract or spiritual concept, it was portrayed as a hard truth.

World War I occurred after a time of industrial progress when the development of new technologies and machinery was widespread. This war was one of the first major conflicts to employ the use of mechanized weapons. These were
weapons created for mass killing, intended for conflict. The moral weight of the use of such tools can be connected to another common theme in war art: the impact of machine warfare.

Objects such as guns, rifles, firearms, tanks, aircraft, battleships, and cannons were illustrated to convey this theme (see Figures 4, 6-7, 10-13, 15). Soldiers were always depicted carrying rifles or firearms, as expected in the midst of conflict. Larger machine weapons such as cannons and tanks were often given central focus, taking up a lot of space in artworks. They were often placed in the middle of the painting, intended to draw the viewer’s attention. In many cases, these weapons were strategically placed among scenes of battle or conflict, as a way to reflect upon the impact of such technologies.

A common feature of the selected paintings is the use of dark, dull, and muted colors. As mentioned earlier, muted colors refer to colors with low saturation, and dull colors are defined as shades that lack light, brightness, or intensity. The prevailing presence of these types of colors makes sense as dark colors are often associated with mourning in both literature and art and can
be associated with evoking certain emotions or moods. Many deeper layers of meaning exist within particular color choices. For instance, shades such as black, gray, ash, and charcoal are well-known symbols of death, loss, and evil. In art, colors like these create a bleak and sorrowful atmosphere, one that sets the stage for the story that unfolds in the illustrations (see Figures 2, 5, 6, 13, 14).

Viewers are drawn into the muted, bismol colors, as a sort of clarification that there are no signs of optimism, no bright days to look forward to. The heavy presence of muted, desaturated shades can represent the lack of clarity, chaos, and the confusion of war, all of which are the consequences of destruction, loss, and the heavy toll of machine warfare. The overall lack of light in the art communicates a sorrowful, melancholy mood. In other words, the lack of light corresponds to increased darkness, a common literary and artistic symbol. It signifies the lack of confidence about what cannot be seen ahead, the fear of what is unknown- it signifies a loss of hope and faith. Another phenomenon that can be seen is the presence of direct parallels between two separate pieces of art (see Figures 6-7). Just at first glance, viewers can notice

the unmistakable similarity between the two works. Taking a deeper look at the paintings shows exactly how this similarity is achieved. The key feature that creates this parallelism is placement. In both paintings, soldiers are placed in almost the same locations. Both works contain illustrations of soldiers in the center-left and bottom right of the paintings. Both works show dead bodies lying down towards the center of the pieces. While both works depict different weapons, in both pieces, large weapons are placed in the top half of the frame. Both works are painted against a foggy, smoky background, utilizing shades of gray and black. It is important to take into account that both paintings were painted nine years apart, by different artists at different locations. Despite this, the striking similarities between the pieces show the shared experiences of those caught up in the conflict. It shows the shared memories and attitudes of people across different places.
Figure 6: Harvey Dunn. (1918). The Tanks at Seishprey [Drawing]. National Museum of American History. [12]
Figure 7: Franze Dudde. (1927). Artillerie Schlacht bei Verdun [Painting]. World War History and Art Museum. [13]
5 Conclusion

Through their art, artists could convey a variety of themes and emotions with the use of different depictions, illustrations, and colors. The destruction, loss of life, and violent nature of machine weaponry influenced the manner in which war was represented in paintings and drawings. Observing wartime art shows the trauma and fear that those who witnessed or experienced the war felt. The original hypothesis for this study stated that art from the war would have a heavy focus on depictions of death. This hypothesis was correct, however, through the research, it was discovered that there were also other themes, such as machine warfare and physical destruction, that were present throughout the artworks. Representations of death, damage, and violence all reflected the scarring effects of conflict. Artists chose to focus on these effects, showing that this was how they interpreted the conflict. The themes of war paintings presented earlier demonstrate the general sentiments people shared with regard to the conflict.

The illustrations depicted in the art show stories of grief and trauma. The dead soldiers drawn in paintings were once someone’s family or friend. The destroyed cities underneath the rubble were once people’s homes. The technologies behind the weapons which were depicted as dangerous and violent were once celebrated as beacons of industrial progress. The unrecognizable heaps and piles of corpses were once everyday civilians with regular lives. The marred battlefields were once fields of lush grass and tall trees.

The objects and places people drew reflected the weight of the conflict. It reflected the painful consequences of battle and emotions of sorrow, horror, and sadness. To the people involved, it was not simply a political event, rather, it was a time of loss and suffering. In the context of war, art can serve as not only a narrative tool, but also a historical tool that can capture the complexity of a large-scale conflict, allowing researchers, scholars, and pupils to study past events from a new perspective.

6 Limitations and Choices

There were a few main limitations that were present in the course of this study. One of the encountered limitations was the research process itself. Due to the evaluative approach of this study, it was difficult to determine which factors to use for the data organization process. It was important to choose factors that were specific, yet could still be connected to the overall context of the re-
search. Figuring out the solution to this situation required a lot of time and also required the testing of the effectiveness of multiple approaches. One of the approaches that was brainstormed was the individual analysis of each painting, and the drawing out of common factors based on the individual analyses. This method could have worked, however, conducting an individual analysis without any predetermined factors would have made it difficult to create concrete connections between the different artworks. Additionally, this approach could also have made the paper itself more scattered as it would have been more difficult to organize a series of individual analyses by themes and depictions.

Another limitation occurred when looking for paintings for the study. In a lot of the galleries and collections that were observed, it was common to see multiple paintings from the same artist. Having multiple paintings from the same artist would have skewed my data as the main purpose of the research was to find correlations between the paintings of different people. In order to address this limitation, it was important to select multiple galleries and collections before beginning the selection process. It was also important to ensure that the author of each selected painting had been identified. Finding and looking through a wide range of collections was a time-consuming process and made the filtering and selection process more rushed.

For this study, the original approach was to study between 10 and 30 paintings. While this seemed like an understandable plan, the range was far too broad; selecting closer to 30 paintings would have made the study less detailed and would not have been feasible for an analysis. Additionally, having a broader range of paintings would not have allowed for the comparison of smaller or more minute details due to the length of the report and the multiple factors that needed to be observed already.

7 Further Studies

The research conducted on this topic can be expanded in a few different ways. This analysis focused mostly on the study of paintings. To expand upon this, a study could be done on the different types of trench art created during the war. This research can revolve around the materials used for the trench art, the different objects created, the significance of the art pieces, and how the art reflected the circumstances of the war. While the original study planned for this report was supposed to include information about trench art, it had to
be excluded as covering it alongside paintings and visual art pieces would have made the study too broad.

Building off of this study, research can also be conducted on the lives of certain war artists or soldier artists to gain a better understanding of people’s lives before the war began. This would provide more context for the basis of this study and the war paintings themselves. This can also allow for the analysis of an artist’s personal style and how it fits into the general artistic trends of the time.

Another study could also be conducted regarding photography during the war. An analysis can be done by comparing photographs with war paintings and drawings in order to understand the differences in expression between the mediums.
8 Appendix

Figure 1: Frank Crozier. (1917). Souvenir Hunters [Oil on canvas]. Australian War Memorial. [7]
Figure 2: Paul Nash. (1917). The Field of Passchendaele by Paul Nash [Watercolor and chalk on wood]. Imperial War Museums. [8]
Figure 3: Otto Dix. (1920-1923). The Trench [Oil on Wood]. Location Unknown. [9]
Figure 4: F.J. Mears. (1916). Camo 15-Inch Howitzer [Painting]. Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. [10]
Figure 6: Harvey Dunn. (1918). The Tanks at Seishprey [Drawing]. National Museum of American History. [12]
Figure 7: Franze Dudde. (1927). Artillerie Schlacht bei Verdun [Painting]. World War History and Art Museum. [13]
Figure 8: George Matthews Harding. (1918). Rounding Up Boche Prisoners [Drawing]. National Museum of American History. [14]
Figure 9: Samuel Johnson Woolf. (1918). First Aid Station at Seicheprey [Oil on canvas]. U.S Army Center of Military History. [15]
Figure 10: John Nash. (1917). Over the Top [Oil on canvas]. Imperial War Museums. [16]
Figure 11: Louis Alexander Weirter. (1916). Battle of Courcelette [Painting]. Canadian War Museum. [17]

Figure 12: Richard Jack. (1917). The Taking of Vimy Ridge [Painting]. Canadian War Museum. [18]
Figure 13: Daniel Sherrin. (1916). British Tank in Action. [Painting]. Canadian War Museum. [19]
Figure 14: Laszlo Mednyanszky. (1918). Prisoners Marching Off [Painting].
Figure 15: Charles De Lacy. (1918). HMS ‘Vindictive’ at Zeebrugge. [Painting]. Royal Museums Greenwich. [21]
References


