

INTRODUCTION

Early in World War I, the French press published illustrations of objects made by the “*artisanat de tranchées*” [craftsmen of the trenches]. Translated into English as “trench art,” this label stuck and continues to be used to describe pieces created from spent war materials or from items of military equipment. Soldier and civilian artisans on both sides of the conflict in the “War to End All Wars” recycled and transformed materials designed to kill other human beings into an amazingly creative and diverse body of folk art that has been largely ignored by art historians and museum curators until recently.

Some World War I trench art pieces were made as personal war mementoes by the artisans who created them, but many were sold to soldiers to take or send home as souvenirs. After the war, civilians and ex-soldiers in war-torn France and Belgium established cottage workshops that produced large numbers of “trench art” souvenirs for sale to post-war battlefield tourists.

Although the major focus of this book is on Great War trench art, several chapters describe and illustrate soldier crafts from earlier and more recent wars to fit these objects into a centuries-old tradition that continues to the present day.

French prisoners of war captured by the British during the Napoleonic Wars created a variety of elaborate objects from soup bones and plaited straw. During the American Civil War, both Union and Confederate soldiers engraved their powder horns, canteens and snuffboxes with personal and patriotic images and created many other objects from bones and spent bullets. When brass-cased artillery shells came into common use during the Spanish-American War and the Boer War, the spent shell casings provided a new medium for artistic expression. Prisoners captured by the British during the Boer War created a large cottage craft industry and developed commercial outlets to market their wares. Military handicrafts made before the Great War are described and illustrated in Chapter One.

Chapter Two focuses on the development of trench art as a medium of artistic expression and suggests a theoretical classification for trench art created during World War I and in the post-war years. Many trench art collectors consider the Great War to have been the “Golden Age” of trench art. The unprecedented scale of the conflict, the number of combatants, the stagnant nature of trench warfare, and the staggering amount of battlefield detritus provided an unlimited amount of raw material for soldier and civilian artisans, and the ingenuity of individual artists resulted in the creation of an amazing body of popular art.

Soldiers have always collected war souvenirs. During World War I, soldiers in each army succumbed to the “souvenir craze” when they first reached the Front and avidly collected battlefield debris and pieces of enemy equipment. Battlefield souvenirs turned into decorative objects during or after the war are illustrated in Chapter Three.

Belgian and French soldiers were the first to transform battlefield debris, especially spent shell casings, into flower vases, tobacco humidors, lighters, letter openers and a myriad of other objects

to send home to their loved ones. Later, they sold similar “trench art” pieces to supplement their military pay. When the American doughboys landed in France, they bought large quantities of these souvenirs from French soldiers and then began to create their own trench art. Soldiers in armies on both sides of the conflict used shell casings, canteens and mess kits to create beautiful pieces of art, often embellishing them with the details of specific battles or with patriotic motifs. These objects and the techniques used to create them are described in Chapters Four through Six.

Prisoners of war, often barely surviving on prison camp rations, created an important body of “trench art” objects made for sale or trade to camp guards for cigarettes and food or sold to the public at exhibitions in the prison camps. Many philanthropic organizations, sympathizing with the plight of prisoners of war and civilian internees, created marketing networks for the sale of craftwork made by prisoners. This interesting work is described and illustrated in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Eight focuses on crafts made by convalescing and disabled soldiers. Wounded soldiers were encouraged to pursue handicraft projects to relieve the boredom of recuperating from their wounds or from diseases contracted in the trenches. A variety of charitable organizations sold craft pieces made by wounded soldiers to provide comforts for them. Other organizations established workshops where permanently disabled soldiers could sell their crafts.

World War I trench art did not end with the cessation of hostilities. Despite post-war salvage efforts, the debris left on the battlefields provided ample raw material for the creation of souvenir pieces for many years after the war ended. In fact, a large quantity of “World War I trench

art” was made after the war by French and Belgian civilians (many of them former soldiers) to meet the demand from tourists and pilgrims visiting the battlefields through the 1920s. A number of commercial firms also manufactured “trench art style” items for sale to the public. This material is illustrated in Chapters Nine and Ten.

Unfortunately, World War I did not turn out to be “The War to End All Wars,” and soldiers continued to create trench art mementoes of the several “little wars” between World War I and World War II. The Second World War produced a massive body of trench art, and the tradition of creating souvenirs from the detritus of war continues to the present day. Chapters Eleven and Twelve describe and illustrate trench art inspired by conflicts after World War I.

Finally, for those who are interested in collecting trench art, Chapter Thirteen provides suggestions for focusing a collection and caring for and displaying it. Two appendices provide a glossary of terms used in describing trench art pieces and information on identifying and dating shell casings.

Extensive quotations from memoirs and diaries written by soldiers and non-combatants place trench art from the Great War within its historical context. The original spelling in contemporary accounts has been retained to give the modern reader a sense of the period in which they were written.

The large number of illustrations of individual objects permits comparison with similar pieces held in museums and in private collections. After the book was laid out, it was possible to include some additional full and half-page photographs of particularly interesting pieces. Some are objects that were not included in the original layout; others are enlarged images of pieces that appear in a smaller format within their respective chapters.