

# The Significance of War Art.

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Books and documentaries are the common sources used instead of art when teaching students about the events of World War II. When I learned about WWII growing up, I only read about the events that occurred through the textbook or watched documentaries in class. During a trip to the Modern Tate Museum in London, England, I saw art created to commemorate the war from the British front. For the first time in my life, the art in the museum opened my eyes to the pain and despair that people went through during the war. Because art evokes emotion, evaluating significant War Art allows for better comprehension of hardships that soldiers and civilians endured during the war. War art was founded by the War Artist's Advisory Committee (WAAC) in 1938 and created by official artist hired to enter areas of conflict and create art that captured the scene and emotion of war for historical documentation. Like other forms of documentation, art can represent a primary source of evidence in accounting for events during the war. War art was used around the world during the Modern art era to generate awareness of the negative impact that the war had on everyone involved. Multiple pieces like *Totes Meer (Dead Sea)* (1940-1) by Paul Nash and *Gassed* (1918) by John Singer Sargent have become internationally renowned pieces because the artistic techniques used to make the observer sympathize with the emotion portrayed in the artwork. The significance of World War II War Art can be evaluated by the reasoning behind creating war art, how emotion is conveyed through art, and how war art adds value to history. The tube shelter sketches by Henry Moore will be critically analyzed in relation to his personal experience and the hardships he witnessed during the war as an example to demonstrate the significance of war art.

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War Art is defined as a collection of any artistic expression created to commemorate and document WWI and WWII. This included work of soldiers, landscape, destruction, and civilian life. The works done by soldiers as a form of graffiti on walls or stone as they travelled were used

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"An analysis of Henry Moore's Second World War tube art sketches demonstrates all of these aspects of significance, and makes a persuasive case for why war art should be included among standard instructional materials about twentieth century global warfare."

to encourage other soldiers and help bolster morale amongst peers by showing triumph throughout the country. After WWI, art was a valuable form of documentation so multiple groups were formed to collect and archive War Art. The group that led the movement was the War Artist's Advisory Committee (WAAC), a British government agency established in 1939. Their objective was to collect and compile a comprehensive historical documentation and provide pictorial record of War by accepting all contributions. (Harries 1984 159) They did this by hiring and purchasing works from 264 artists. The artists that were hired had to be deployed into battle to create the art desired by the committee. They were specially protected and not allowed to fight. (Ross 1984 22) The chair of the WAAC was Kenneth Clark, who happened to be a good friend of Henry Moore. Moore was offered to join the committee before, but he had enough experience with war after having to serve 1917 and suffering from gas poisoning. Once Clark acquired some of Moore's shelter drawings, Clark had to have him as one of his artists, so Moore agreed to work for him if he could just continue to draw the people in the tube shelter. (Moore 1999 166-169) By the end of the war, they accumulated 5,570 works of art.

Although war art is a form of Modern Art (1860s – 1970s), it branches away with its distinct techniques and purpose. Modern art takes the subjects of everyday urban life experiences and combines it with the imaginative interpretation, but artworks could simply be interpreted as anything, especially if they were not produced to tell a story or capture emotion. The use of war art was intended to illustrate techniques that educate the public and emphasize on gestures to cause sympathy in the observers. For the public to sympathize with the victims and understand the reality of war, visual representation of agony was crucial. (Harries 1984 150) As a work of art used to portray war, war art can easily become confused with propaganda. Richard Alan Nelson, an author and artistic scholar, defines propaganda in his book *A Chronology and Glossary of Propaganda in the United*

States as such: “A systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass and direct media channels” (Nelson 1996 232) This quote takes away the negative connotation and highlights its purpose to convey emotion. War art is a form of soft white propaganda.<sup>1</sup>

Freud, a renowned philosopher who originated Freudian Philosophy, claims that artistic genius depends on the ability to use raw impulse and fear from the unconscious to achieve authenticity and originality in artwork. (H.H. Arnosan 318) Since Moore could not create live paintings in the station, he had to use his memory and small notes to construct his works. With the combination of his imagination, experience, and notes from his small sketchbook, he developed his published work. These works were represented a reflection of reality – the common tragedy of war, making him an artistic genius of surrealism with his art about the people during the Blitz

When reading through a typical high school sophomore World History textbook, one would read a couple of sentences about something that might not be significant to the overall concept that historians want them to take away, but detrimental to the empathetic connection between history and the reader. In an excerpt from *World History: Patterns of Interaction* (2015) the chapter 32 section one begins discussing Winston Churchill’s refusal to surrender no matter the conditions. Briefly describes the German bombings by stating: “*In the summer of 1940, the Luftwaffe (LOOFT•VAHF•uh), Germany’s air force, began bombing Great Britain. At first, the Germans*

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<sup>1</sup> White propaganda is propaganda that truthfully states its origin (the source is outright identified). The information presented is accurate (even if one sided, etc.). Soft propaganda is when the source is known, information presented accurate, Goal is to further the goals of the propagandist but not without regard to the well-being of the audience.

*targeted British airfields and aircraft factories. Then, on September 7, 1940, they began focusing on the cities, especially London, to break British morale. Despite the destruction and loss of life, the British did not waver.*" (Beck 2015 928) Then concludes by discussing the new technology that helped the Royal Airforce fight back, and the bombings are never discussed again. For a World History textbook in England, there is valuable information missing from this text, being that the Blitz was one of the most catastrophic events in England's history. The quote above describes the period of the Blitz<sup>2</sup> where over 30,000 tons of explosives were dropped killing over 40,000 individuals. (Gardiner 2011 32) When reading numbers off a page, the reader cannot fathom the pain, despair, and terror that the civilians endured during this time. If a piece of war art was included near the text that showed the affect the Blitz had on the people of England, the reader will develop a better understanding on the significance of nuclear bombings, the impact it can have on people, and the urge to despise war. During the Blitz, thousands of people moved into tube stations and slept there because the official bombing shelters were proved to be inadequate, so it was the most sensible solution for people who needed shelter from the bombings to settle in the underground platforms protected by London clay. (Berthoud 2003 171) It was in these underground station shelters that Henry Moore gained his inspiration for his paintings.

Born in Castleford, Yorkshire, England, Henry Moore always had a passion for sculpture, especially after visiting the British museum and gaining interest in bold anti-naturalistic sculptures by Mexican and African artist. (Moore 1999 27) Moore was inspired by European Modernism and focused many of his subjects in the reclining position and the head. After WWI, He was also influenced by surrealism and combined abstract and figurative elements referring to organic forms

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<sup>2</sup> The Blitz was a series of heavy bombing raids focused on terrorizing and destroying Britain by bombing major coastal ports, the Royal Airforce, centers for production, and civilian homes until May of 1941.

creating a style labeled by Geoffrey Grigson biomorphism.<sup>3</sup> (Arnosan 1988 468) As Moore and his wife were coming home from a dinner party in central London on the night of September 11, 1940, they stumbled upon numerous people taking refuge from the air raids above in the Belsize Park underground station. (Berthoud 2003 170) Men, women, and children were described by Henry Moore as “continuous layers of bodies in a reclining position forming tight intimate groups to cut off what is happening above”, he had “never seen so many reclining figures in and the train tunnels seemed to be like holes in my sculptures”. (Berthoud 2003 170) This extraordinary scene resonated deep with Moore causing him to revisit the tubes consistently to sketch the sheltering Londoners.

Moore never intended on creating Realism Art by using the method of sketching while the people posed in front of him. He was in a shelter where people lived, changed their clothes, and slept, live sketching would be a great invasion of privacy and was prohibited. Doing so would invite strangers to attack and be hostile towards him. Moore “returned to London two days a week spending the nights in the underground where I filled my little book with sketches”. (Moore 1999 170) He had a small sketchbook that he would use to make notes and simple sketches like the positioning of someone’s leg to help his memory. If he wanted to remember specific details, he would walk past several times, imprinting the scene on his visual memory. Since he would spend seven days creating from his imagination, his works related multiple experiences in one painting. Moore would go home and create larger sketches based on his ‘memory of actuality’, then takes the best sketches from there and turns them in to paintings. (Berthoud 2003 174)

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<sup>3</sup> Works of abstract art that come from live forms such as plants, animals, and humans. Came into use in 1930s to describe imagery in abstract types of surrealism paintings and sculptures.



*Figure 1: A Tilbury Shelter Scene*



*Figure 2: Gray Tube Shelter*



Figure 3: Londoners shelter in Liverpool Street station during the Blitz, 194



Figure 4: The Shelter Perspective<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Museum of London. "War Artists Bill Brandt and Henry Moore Paint the Underground during the London Blitz." *Museum of London*, Museum of London, 18 July 2017, [www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/blitz-underground-how-war-artists-saw-tube-shelters-henry-moore](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/blitz-underground-how-war-artists-saw-tube-shelters-henry-moore).



Henry Moore's tube shelter art work was created during the Blitz. Most of the materials used include gouache, watercolor, ink, ink wash, crayon, pen, wax, pencil, and chalk on paper. (Moore 1999 173-175) To create his thematic grim mood, Moore would lay down crayon then flood the image with dark watercolor, so the white and grey wax shapes loom out of the darkness. The marks themselves are scratchy and wiry, creating a sense of unease and tension. (Jones 2015 8) He mainly used black, grey, and white which evoked depression, fear, and dirtiness. Occasionally he used yellow to represent the train coming towards the people resting close to the tracks, or as a symbol of the little bit of hope that the bombings will end soon.

Moore used depth and focus techniques to cause abrupt feelings within the viewer. He valued the relationship between the figures and their surroundings. Tension is created when his painting jumps between foreground and background within the scratchy lines complimenting the figure. (Jones 2015 9) He paid close attention to the positioning of their bodies, as they were highlighted to show their vulnerability. (Berthoud 2003 177) Moore's work can be considered a form of Existentialism.<sup>5</sup> (Arnosan 1988 439) The original National Gallery catalog describes Moore's works as "a terrifying vista of recumbent shapes vanishing down the tunnel". (Jones 2015 12) The vanishing shapes represent the immense amount of people that take up the entire station for as far as the eye can see. They could also be vanishing because the figures are typically grey and ghostlike looming out of the darkness of the tunnel. Moore's drawings were also described by the *NY Times* as "figures of life that look terrifically threatened... below the edge of will... terrible things being done." (Russel 1986) This quote exemplifies the emotion that is conveyed through

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<sup>5</sup> Derived from a philosophy that placed stress on individual ethics and on the authentic experience of selfhood, on freedom and choice, Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard created Existentialism in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century. Exhibiting the importance of the individual, and their duty to determine the meaning of life. Existentialism was a philosophical response to madness and pointless violence that was endemic to Western civilization.

War Art pieces, allowing the viewer to develop an empathetic connection with the figures in the artwork. The emotions channeled through the viewer are very strong and act as a cry for help as well as a cry for prevention to never allow someone to endure that experience.

Moore's work was well known for its powerful depiction of terrorized civilian lifestyle as they hid in the tube shelters. Combined, his works projects a theme entrapment and nuclear war that shows how many people lost hope during this time and had to stay in the tube shelter for the sake of their lives. His works were so significant that Kenneth Clark got them exhibited at the National Gallery with the intentions that the population would be so traumatized by his works that the British government would accept German peace terms for the sake of the people at any cost. Imogen Cornwall Jones, an Art Historian and Educator said that "*the government included Moore's drawings in the 1941 British Art War show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in efforts to persuade the US government to provide more aid.*" (Jones 2015 11) Moore's work being presented at this art show was very important because it demonstrated the amount of power that War Art has in the political system. For the government to use art as a reason to persuade another country to operate in their favor shows the universal emotional response that Moore was able to channel into his work of art and why conveying emotion through art is valuable.

Art is a common way of expressing and conveying emotion, the combination of colors with techniques as perceived by the human eye can make one not just see but also feel the intended purpose of the artwork. It allows specific experiences that arise unconsciously, which gives a piece of art value. When bright colors are used with smooth curved lines, a sense of bliss is created, but when the colors of a piece of art are dark and have straight jagged lines, a sense of fear is created. We respond to art because it somewhat reflects the real world we all inhabit today. Our responses to the aesthetics of art depends greatly on the conceptualization of personal experiences. Artist use

empathy to convey expressions of emotional despair. (Dissanayake 1983 36) During the war, civilians experienced emotions of sadness, terror, and despair. Use of body language, lighting, and color are strong techniques used to evoke emotion. Figures tend to ‘slouch’ or look exhausted showing that they are exhausted. Low-key lighting<sup>6</sup> is used to form a dark and gloomy scene. An achromatic filter on the color choice heightens an emotional scene by taking out the saturation<sup>7</sup> of a color choice.

Focal points are very critical when the artist wants the viewer to pay attention to specific details, like using high-key lighting to highlight objects, which puts stress on them and causes the eye to rest on it. (Lewis 2016 53) Artistic value is seen in the use of layering an image to deepen the scene, causing the viewer to feel they can be a part of the work. Fear is best conveyed through tactile imagery and small detail. The composition consists of directional lines used to draw attention from the frame to the focus point. “Placing things where unwanted helps viewer gain more empathy and heightens the emotional experience”. (Lewis 2016 84) Moore does this by overlapping the bodies in a specific spot channeling a sense of claustrophobia in the viewer and the people vanishing in the background seem as if they are worthless. These techniques were commonly seen throughout art depicting civilian life during the war.

High school history textbooks only teach the major concepts of war like why it started, who was involved, and what the political outcome was. Most books do not go into depth about the impact of war on soldier and civilian livelihood. Reading the number of casualties does not help the reader understand the huge toll that war takes on its victims. War art was created as a form of

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<sup>6</sup> Very low on the brightness scale. The brightness scale ranges from 0% – 100%, 0 being completely dark and 100 as bright as possible.

<sup>7</sup> Saturation is defined as the intensity of color in an image

historical documentation to archive events and emotions in the battlefield as they occurred. Although war art is propaganda, it is seen as positive because it is an authentic work documenting history for the public to understand what people went through during the war. War art could be beneficial to students if implemented into the curriculum. By understanding and observing war art, students will become more engaged in learning about the war and have milestones to help them better remember specific events that occurred. It will demonstrate the horrors of war and develop an empathetic connection with the observer so that they don't want anyone to endure the pain and suffering that people did during the war and could be inspired to fight against the use of war. Critiquing art builds the skill of interpretation in the brain so having students analyze war art could help them learn how to break situations down and critique them in other endeavors. War art could be incorporated more into the curriculum by adding a war artist drawing with an annotated description next to the text that it describes in the textbook. War art is one of the reasons we value art today and will continue to value it as a symbol of historical reference and empathetic connection.

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