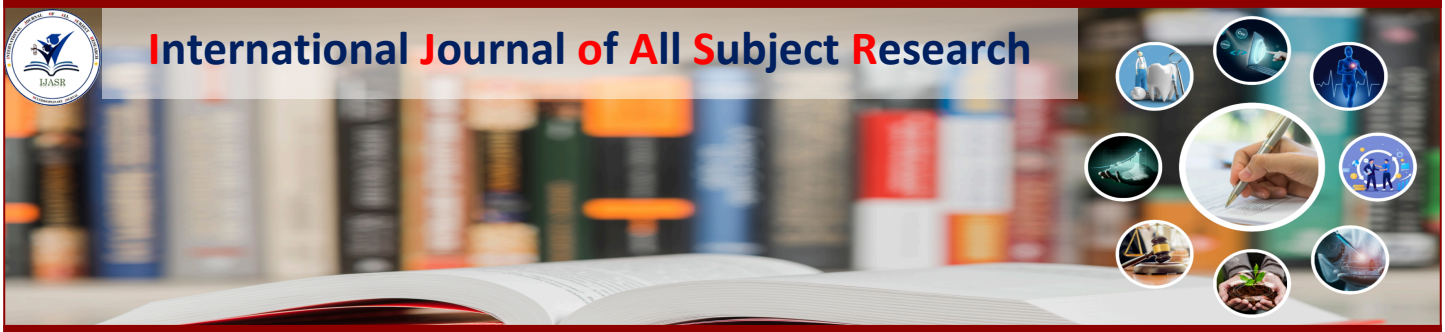
Impact Factor (SJIF): 5.158 E-ISSN: 2583-7206, P-ISSN: 3049-2432

International Journal of All Subject Research



Received: 09/April/2025 **IJASR:** 2025; 4(3):34-38 **Accepted:** 24/May/2025

Aesthetic Evaluation of the Works of War Artists during World Wars I and II

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Abstract

The role of war artists during World Wars I and II transcended traditional artistic expression, merging aesthetic innovation with practical wartime applications. These artists, functioning as camoufleurs, combatant painters, and chroniclers of war, employed modernist art movements such as Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism to create camouflage patterns, dazzle paintings, and vivid depictions of conflict. Their contributions saved countless lives through deceptive designs and provided a visual record of war's human and emotional toll. This paper evaluates the aesthetic and functional dimensions of war artists' works, analyzing their use of abstraction, their portrayal of war's brutality, and their lasting impact on art and military history. By examining key figures like Norman Wilkinson, André Mare, Pablo Picasso, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, alongside lesser-known contributors, this study highlights the intersection of art, survival, and modernity during the global conflicts of the 20th century.

Keywords: War Artists, Camouflage, Dazzle Painting, Abstract Art, World War I, World War II, Modernism.

Introduction

The World Wars of the 20th century were not only geopolitical cataclysms but also transformative moments for art. Artists, conscripted or voluntarily engaged, became integral to military efforts, applying their creative skills to camouflage, documentation, and propaganda. Their work, often rooted in modernist movements like Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism, blurred the boundaries between aesthetic innovation and practical utility. War artists such as André Mare, Norman Wilkinson, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy crafted camouflage designs that saved lives, while others, like Otto Dix and John Nash, captured the visceral horrors of conflict. This paper explores the aesthetic contributions of war artists during World Wars I and II, evaluating their dual roles as creators of functional designs and chroniclers of human experience. By analyzing their use of abstraction, their engagement with modernist principles, and their emotional portrayals of war, this study underscores the profound impact of war artists on both art and military history. The experiences of active participation of war artists gave rise to a different dimension of modern art. While engaged in battle or in the trenches they could experience life from a quite different perspective. War has been an inevitable fact. The world wars I and II, apart from being devastative also left imprints on the art world. The experience depicted by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (who died in action) (1891-1915) even from the trenches show his unflinching resolve as an artist and his favour of vorticism as a mode of expression. The other artists who served the wars include Franz Mark, John Macke (both killed in war), Fernand Leger, Paul Klee, Paul Nash, John Piper, Staley Spancer, Graham Sutherland, Augustus John and Henri Moore. There were many others who were employed by states as state artists and contributed in the official war art programme. Official war art emerged during World War I in Canada, Britain, Australia and the USA.

Historical Context of War Artists

The concept of the war artist emerged formally during World War I, as nations recognized the value of visual documentation and deception in warfare. Britain, Canada, Australia, and the United States established official war art programs to record military activities and boost morale (Gough 45). These programs employed artists to depict battles, soldiers, and the home front, often for propaganda purposes. However, war artists also served as camoufleurs, designing patterns to conceal equipment, ships, and entire cities from enemy detection. The French army, for instance, established the first camouflage unit in 1915 under Lucien-Victor Guirand de Scévola, a symbolist painter who revolutionized military concealment (Behrens 22).

World War II saw an evolution in these roles, with technological advancements enabling more sophisticated camouflage designs and artistic depictions. Artists like Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Roland Penrose applied Bauhaus and Surrealist principles to military deception, while others, such as Graham Sutherland and John Piper, documented the

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devastation of the Blitz (Foss 78). The wars' unprecedented mobilization of resources, including artistic talent, created a unique environment where art served both survival and memory. Practical contribution of abstract art has been effective in saving thousands of lives across all the fighting defence forces of both World War I and II. Artists were conscripted for military service as per their nationality and served in their respective military organizations. In a way we can say, art was drawn to war. The war needed the support and help of art for saving the lives of men it engaged to fight against and fight for. The application of art for the purpose of war gave rise to a newer role of art-that of the 'saviour'.

There cannot be a greater contribution of art towards humanity at large and the fighting troops of the World Wars in particular wherein we find application of art saving the lives of soldiers of each nation. Like true warriors, forgetting their own selves, these artists applied the principles of art in most trying conditions and many among them gave away their lives in doing so.

The Role of Camouflage in War Art

Prof. Ann Elias says-

> "…Abstraction's dissolution of form, surrealism's subversion of the authority of vision, collage's disorientation of perspective and cubist's fragmentation were all modernist trends which essentially was adopted by the artist for the cause of camouflage." [1]

Etymologically, the term 'Camouflage' denotes 'a way of hiding soldiers and military equipment, using paint, leaves or nets, so that they look like part of their surroundings' [2]. The action of misleading the enemy by concealing or misrepresenting the true identity of troops, tanks, guns, aircraft, aircraft hangers, refuelling points for aircraft and vehicles, water distilleries, oil refineries, airports and seaports, various vital installations, for the purpose of deceit is called '*Military Camouflage'*. It is crucial to one's victory or defeat. Camouflage is both an art and a science. It involves a combination of two elements such as concealment and deception. Protective concealment permits one to see without being seen, thereby, enabling to strike first conclusively and at minimum cost. It involves a code of controlled behaviour. Deception permits one to approach the unseen and to remain hidden within striking distance of the enemy. This is achieved by various measures like disguise, dummy installations, mock-ups or feints to distract or mislead the enemy.

Military Camouflage is not only an inseparable part of military strategy and tactics, but derivative of modern art's most transformational and epoch-making gift for the cause of humanity. The devastations of the battlefield, bombing by bomber aircraft and shelling by tanks, artillery fire, gunfire, attacks by Air to Surface or Surface to Surface Missiles lead to loss of lives en masse, both military and civilian populace. In order to avert perils and dread of war, we find Art coming to the cause of rescue, and is detrimental to not only victory or defeat in the battlefield, but the deciding factor between life and death of each of the souls engaged in the act of war. It is a gift of art to the cause of saving of human lives engaged in the act of war at various battlefields throughout the world, at different timeline and theatres of operations.

Military camouflage is the process of emulating the visual impression of the background of the battle field, a tank, a war equipment or the complete backdrop. In order to do so, the war equipment and the apparel are synchronised in appearance with the backdrop by application of appropriate colour, shape, size and texture.

The battles all across the world bears testimony to the fact that Military camouflage is an extremely important factor in war. Only in the correct presentation of the camouflage, military personnel and equipment at both sides can survive.

Camouflage, derived from the French term *camoufler* (to disguise), became a cornerstone of military strategy during the World Wars. War artists, leveraging their understanding of color, form, and perception, played a pivotal role in developing camouflage techniques. Their work drew heavily on modernist art movements, which emphasized abstraction and visual disruption.

Camouflage in World War I

All the artists drawn into war had actively engaged themselves in the very formulation of various design patterns which were necessarily abstract. The application of camouflage during World War I was a direct response to the advent of aerial reconnaissance and photography. André Mare, a French camoufleur, described his process in a letter:

I found myself in a huge hayloft and I painted nine 'Kandinsky's' (…) on tent canvas. This process had a very useful purpose: to make artillery positions invisible to reconnaissance planes and aerial photography by covering them with canvases painted in a roughly pointillist style and in line with observation of the colours of natural camouflage (known as mimicry) (…) From now on, painting must make the picture that betrays our presence sufficiently blurred and distorted for the position to be unrecognizable (qtd. In Newark 56).

Mare's reference to Wassily Kandinsky underscores the influence of abstract art on camouflage. By employing pointillist techniques and natural color palettes, camoufleurs disrupted the visual coherence of military targets, rendering them indistinguishable from their surroundings.

Another significant contribution was the development of dazzle painting, a naval camouflage technique pioneered by British artist Norman Wilkinson. In April 1917, Wilkinson proposed painting ships with bold, contrasting geometric patterns to confuse German U-boat commanders (Hartcup 89). Unlike traditional camouflage, which aimed to conceal, dazzle painting sought to distort a ship's outline, making it difficult to estimate its speed, direction, or range. Wilkinson's designs, rooted in Cubist principles, were applied to over 4,000 merchant vessels and 400 naval ships (Behrens 67). The Royal Academy of Art in London became a hub for designing these patterns, with artists creating complex, intersecting shapes to thwart enemy periscopes.

Wilkinson's work built on earlier ideas by zoologist John Graham Kerr, who in 1914 advocated for "parti-painting" to break up a ship's contour. Kerr's theories, inspired by animal camouflage, emphasized contrasting colors and irregular patterns (Kerr 34). Although initially met with resistance, Kerr's ideas gained traction, supported by figures like Winston Churchill. By 1917, Wilkinson's standardized dazzle patterns had become a critical component of British naval strategy, significantly reducing ship losses in the Atlantic (Hartcup 92).

American artist Abbott Handerson Thayer also influenced camouflage theory with his 1896 work, The Law Which Underlines Protective Coloration. Thayer argued that animals used graduated colors and abstract forms to blend into their environments, a principle he believed could be adapted for military use (Thayer 12). Despite opposition from figures like

Theodore Roosevelt, Thayer's ideas informed early camouflage efforts, particularly in the United States and Britain (Behrens 45).

Camouflage in World War II

World War II saw a refinement of camouflage techniques, driven by technological advancements and the integration of modernist art principles. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, a Bauhaus artist, made significant contributions to American military camouflage. His experiments with abstract forms and kinetic movement executed the design of patterns to conceal cylindrical targets, such as propane tanks, and entire cities, including Chicago and Burbank (Elias 112). Moholy-Nagy's aerial reconnaissance sorties over Chicago allowed him to study landscapes and develop concealment strategies for urban environments. His 1943 exhibition at the Chicago Design School showcased these innovations, influencing a new generation of camoufleurs (Moholy-Nagy 89).

In Britain, surrealist artist Roland Penrose standardized camouflage patterns for the Home Guard. His *Home Guard Manual of Camouflage* (1941) drew on Cubism, Pointillism, and Surrealism to create deceptive designs (Penrose 23). Similarly, Australian artists Max Dupain and Frank Hinder used double exposures and complex shading to blur the distinction between foreground and background, enhancing concealment (Elias 134).

As art historian Ann Elias notes, "abstraction's dissolution of form, surrealism's subversion of the authority of vision, collage's disorientation of perspective, and cubist's fragmentation were all modernist trends which essentially were adopted by the artist for the cause of camouflage" (Elias 145). These techniques not only saved lives but also pushed the boundaries of artistic expression, demonstrating the synergy between art and warfare.

Aesthetic Analysis of War Artists' Portrayals

Beyond camouflage, war artists documented the human and emotional dimensions of conflict, often rejecting traditional realism in favor of modernist styles. Their works, ranging from self-portraits to battle scenes, reflect the chaos, violence, and existential weight of war.

World War I Artists

1. **Pablo Picasso:** Though not conscripted due to Spain's neutrality, engaged with the war through his redesign of French army uniforms. His painting *Gunner Guillaume de Kostrwitzky* (1915), a portrait of poet Guillaume Apollinaire, uses disproportionate lines and abstracted forms to critique the glorification of war (Richardson 234). Picasso's Cubist approach subverts heroic narratives, presenting war as fragmented and disorienting.
2. **Otto Dix:** A German Expressionist, served in the trenches and produced stark depictions of war's brutality. His *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (1914) uses vivid reds and whites to convey violence and savagery, while the reverse side, *Self-Portrait as a Gunner*, employs gold against a black background to evoke impending death (Eberle 67). Dix's watercolors capture the psychological transformation of soldiers, highlighting war's dehumanizing effects.
3. **Max Beckmann:** Serving as a medical assistant, witnessed the horrors of mustard gas attacks at Ypres. His self-portraits, marked by muted colors and somber expressions, reflect the emotional toll of treating the wounded (Schmied 89). Beckmann's work diminishes the vibrancy of pre-war Expressionism, emphasizing war's grim reality.
4. **William Orpen:** An established portraitist, juxtaposed the suffering of soldiers with the comforts of civilian life. His paintings for British headquarters balance official propaganda with subtle critiques of war's inequities (Gough 123).
5. **André Mare:** A Cubist camoufleur, incorporated his artistic style into his self-portrait, using thin lines and symbolic elements like the French tricolor. His work reflects the discipline required to maintain artistic identity amidst military duties (Newark 78).
6. **Eric Kennington's:** *The Kensingtons at Laventie* (1916) portrays a regiment in a snow-covered ruin, notable for its precise composition and lack of sentimentality. The painting's realism serves as a historical document, capturing the stoicism of soldiers (Hancock 45).
7. **John Nash's:** *Over the Top* (1918) John Nash's depiction portrays the cruelty of the loss of 68 lives of his comrades in matter of minutes out of a total strength of 80 of which he remained to be one of the twelve survivors. This happened in Marcoing near Cambrai, with the First Artists'Rifles. This portrays the futility of and catastrophe of unprotected offensive. The strength of this portrayal in realism is equally important as a visual document of such catastrophe.Its unflinching portrayal of death and futility stands as a powerful anti-war statement (Goss 56).
8. **Gino Severini:** Was a leading exponent of the French Cubists and the Italian Futurists. He portrays large symbolic ensembles such as amalgamation of details and words, the general mobilization order, the anchor of a ship, instruments for finding range, the roundel of an aircraft's wing-utilising these elements in a cubist pattern, he depicts the art in its entirety without depicting any human figure. This reflects his inclination towards adoration of the mechanical spirit, the spirit of science his preference to utilize engineering drawing drawing for exactness and precision. He creates a unified harmony between industrial and artistic modernity. A Futurist and Cubist, created symbolic ensembles without human figures, using mechanical imagery to celebrate industrial modernity. His works, such as *Armored Train (1915),* integrate engineering precision with artistic harmony (Bohn 90).
9. **Henri Gaudier-Brzeska:** A Vorticist killed in action, used geometric forms to depict soldiers, maintaining his commitment to Vorticism's synthetic aesthetic even in the trenches (Cork 112).
10. **William Roberts:** In his painting entitled *'The First German Gas Attack at Ypres'* commemorates the event of first gas attack by the German forces on 22nd April,1915. Here the French soldiers are depicted in red and blue and the Canadian soldiers in khaki. In the portrayal, the expressions of horror, dismay and sufferings is depicted and it reflects the personal angst as suffered by artist himself. Due to its strong construction and depiction of violence, this is considered one of the most valuable pictorial document of the war. *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres (1918)* captures the horror of chemical warfare, using bold colors to depict soldiers' suffering. Its strong composition makes it a key pictorial record (Rowling 78).
11. **Henri de Groux**'s *Gas Masks* (1916) portrays soldiers as

grotesque, animalistic figures, critiquing war's dehumanization (De Groot 45).

12. **Frank Brangwyn**'s *Tank in Action* (1917) uses monumental scale and vivid detail to create a dramatic effect, emphasizing the mechanized nature of modern warfare (Branson 34).
13. **David Bomberg:** David Bomberg was one of the major artists working in cubo-futuristic approach and verging on abstraction utilizing geometrical signs. His work entitled '*Sappers at Work'* celebrates the success of destroying a salient of the German defences at Saint Eloi near Arras It depicts the compositional elements of angular lines in contrast with human figures portrayed in geometric figuration. The strength of this painting is based on the powerfully dynamic rhythms and obliquely placed lines in blue and purple and tendency towards geometric signs of figuration. *Sappers at Work* (1917) employs Cubist and Futurist geometry to celebrate military engineering, using dynamic lines to convey energy and movement (Brown 67).
14. **Fernand Léger:** Fernand Leger in his work entitled *'Soldiers Playing Cards'* depicts not the horror of the war but a moment of scarce leisure. He portrays soldiers in a faceless and expressionless manner. Their fragmentation reduced to barrels, cones and tubular fragments. They can be discerned only on the basis of the insignia of their ranks. The space is constructed by an admix of vertical lines in the background and broken lines in the centre-in an enclosed geometrical depiction. *Soldiers Playing Cards* (1916) fragments soldiers into geometric shapes, reflecting Cubism's influence and the dehumanizing monotony of war (Léger 89).

World War II Artists

World War II artists built on the legacy of their predecessors, using advanced techniques to depict war's complexity. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's camouflage work for the U.S. military, including urban concealment strategies, showcased his Bauhaus training in abstraction and perception (Moholy-Nagy 102). His contributions to *Civilian Defence* journal (1942) formalized camouflage as a scientific and artistic discipline (Scott *et al*. 45).

Roland Penrose's surrealist approach to camouflage influenced British military strategy, while his paintings explored war's psychological impact (Penrose 67). Max Dupain and Frank Hinder in Australia used photographic techniques to enhance camouflage, reflecting modernist experimentation (Elias 89).

Graham Sutherland and John Piper documented the Blitz, using abstract forms to convey destruction and resilience (Foss 92). Their work balanced propaganda with emotional depth, capturing the war's toll on civilians.

Critical Evaluation

The aesthetic evaluation of war artists' works reveals their ability to merge functionality with emotional resonance. Their use of modernist techniques—Cubism's fragmentation, Futurism's dynamism, and Expressionism's intensity—allowed them to address war's practical and existential dimensions. The World Wars had a congregation of war artists of various hues. The practical application of the individual viewpoints was accorded by different artists. Gaudier Brzeska had opted to Vorticism for depicting the movements of a fired shell. For Braque, the experience of serving in the war had reflected in his post war depiction. We find his forms were less geometrical and more individualized. The engagement in war had effected the patterns of many other artists.

Functional Contributions

As camoufleurs, war artists like Wilkinson, Mare, and Moholy-Nagy saved countless lives by applying abstract patterns to conceal military assets. Dazzle painting, rooted in Cubism, disrupted enemy targeting, while pointillist and surrealist techniques hid artillery and cities. These applications demonstrate art's capacity to serve survival, life-saving purposes (Behrens 89).

Emotional and Aesthetic Innovation

The pictorial works of war artists rejected traditional battle scenes, embracing modernist abstraction to depict war's chaos. Léger's comparison of war to a "geometry problem" reflects the influence of Cubism on his fragmented compositions (Léger 186). Dix's and Beckmann's portrayals of suffering highlight war's psychological toll, while Nash's and Roberts's works serve as historical documents of specific atrocities. These artists experienced war's "hottest hues of human emotion," facing death and destruction firsthand, which shaped their innovative aesthetics (Gough 589).

Lasting Impact

The legacy of war artists extends beyond the wars, influencing subsequent generations. Their works, preserved in museums and archives, shape how we understand conflict. Official war art programs in Canada, Britain, and Australia established a precedent for documenting war visually, while individual artists' contributions to modernism advanced artistic movements (Foss 201). The integration of art into military strategy, particularly through camouflage, remains a testament to the interdisciplinary power of creativity.

Conclusion

War artists during World Wars I and II played a unique role, merging aesthetic innovation with practical necessity. Their camouflage designs, rooted in modernist abstraction, saved lives by deceiving the enemy, while their paintings and drawings captured war's human and emotional toll. Artists like Norman Wilkinson, André Mare, Pablo Picasso, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy demonstrated the power of art to serve both survival and expression. By rejecting traditional realism and embracing Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism, they created works that remain vital historical and artistic records. This study affirms the enduring significance of war artists, whose contributions reshaped art, military strategy, and our understanding of conflict.

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