

OBJECTS AND MATERIAL ASPECTS OF WAR

Trench Art

Materiality of the Memory of War

Quentin BARIL

ABSTRACT

Of all the artefacts produced by The Great War, trench art is probably the most curious and complex. These commemorative objects raise questions with regard to their technical creation, as well as to the attention they received and the intention with which they were made. An artistic expression of a personal experience during a major European event, the various forms taken by trench art make this practice a fascinating object of anthropological and archeological study.



The expression trench art, which appeared during the First World War, denotes the act of transforming materials connected to armed conflict, generally collected on the battlefield, into everyday objects or symbolic objects. Examples of campaign souvenirs produced by soldiers in European armies have existed since the late eighteenth century, and were also present during the nineteenth century, although it was during The Great War that trench art developed on a massive scale, with objects being produced by hand on all fronts. The duration of the conflict and the long waiting periods experienced by soldiers between combat in large part explain this phenomenon, which involved both military personnel and civilians. The intentions that presided over the production of these objects, along with the attention they drew, have made them into essential social and commemorative artefacts for understanding European mentalities during war and the aftermath of armed conflict.

The production of trench art objects on the front began with the soldiers' need to occupy themselves during their spare time. They individualized their standard-issue equipment over the course of various operations. Large numbers of mugs, pipes, mess kits, canteens, and helmets were painted or engraved, and adorned with a wide variety of drawings and inscriptions. At the same time, soldiers themselves made large numbers of small useful objects, which became part of their everyday lives, and replaced the equipment provided by the military. This was the case for trench knives, snuffboxes, letter openers, and lighters. The desire to create unique objects for oneself or one's family also led soldiers to make spontaneous and individualized productions, which took the form of genuine art objects. These included decorated vases, crucifixes, sculpted wooden canes, and musical instruments. Trench art spread within armies particularly when the conflict unfolded over the long-term. The soldiers' production became more frequent, to the extent that certain men with no experience in producing objects tried it for themselves under the influence of their comrades.

Trench art was less frequent in conflicts after 1914-1918, primarily due to the abandonment of wars of position. Yet the objects created by soldiers in all conflicts during the modern period took on the same forms, and responded to the same intentions. They helped overcome boredom as well as to decorate and supplement personal equipment. They also took up this occupation to exchange their creations for tobacco or food with comrades seeking their know-how. However, as soldiers in the field were often far from home (colonial soldiers during the world wars, French soldiers in Algeria, etc.), the production of these objects also provided them with familiar markers reminding them of their lives before the war. Through their creations the men also expressed the ideals for which they fought, as well as their vision of the enemy and their religious beliefs. After the conflict, the objects took on a commemorative status, becoming souvenirs of the combatant experience. For instance, decorated vases and lighters bearing the dates of the Algerian war took on a role in the domestic space of former French soldiers.

Actors other than soldiers engaged in combat produced objects akin to trench art. Civilians who were impoverished by the war, whether displaced or remaining in the area of conflict, could notably improve their everyday lives by selling them, as was the case with Belgians for instance. During the postwar period, and in the particular case of The Great War, civilian handicraft production continued even through materials recovered after the resumption of cultivation. This commercial activity functioned for a number of years thanks to pilgrimages to battlefields. Aside from the front, trench art was also practiced by imprisoned soldiers, or those who were convalescing. In the first case this involved objects produced from perishable materials (wood, bone, etc.), which soldiers exchanged to improve their conditions of detention. In the second case, the production of objects was in connection with a rehabilitation program for wounded soldiers, or simply as a form of entertainment.

While the productions are well attested, the production locations at the front still remain to be precisely defined. Written and photographic sources can be used to identify them, although they cannot mitigate the lack of concrete examples of vestiges in the field. The excavations of the ZAC Actiparc in Arras conducted in 2000 were nevertheless among the first to provide traces of artisanal production, followed by those conducted in Marcilly-sur-Tille in 2011, or in the Borrieswalde camp (in the Argonne forest) in 2015. These archeological discoveries confirm that trench art took place during the soldiers' rest time at the intermediate lines or the rear, a few kilometers from

combat areas.

There are a number of archeological signs of this activity, although they are difficult to identify precisely. There was no location specifically dedicated to the production of objects, although a series of traces can nevertheless help identify a “workshop” environment. Numerous stages were involved in the transformation of the materials: cutting, plastic deformation through hammering while hot or cold, metal casting, welding, and engraving (which could also be done outside of the “workshop” area). The archeological traces take the form of cutaway scraps from objects found at the front, primarily cartridge cases and shells, or semi-finished objects found in garbage dumps or near the soldiers’ barracks. The presence of tools (hammers, chisels, tongs) can also serve as indications of handicraft production, although they are not specific to the production of objects. In addition, a furnace combined with other elements can be considered an important indication. It can be an indication of plastic deformation or the melting of materials—which was sometimes carried out at very high temperatures (up to 1,500° C)—as well as welding, which was carried out at low temperature. These operations entailed mastery of considerable know-how on the part of the soldiers carrying them out. However, only the Borrieswalde site has yielded tools and furnaces, which along with the scraps found at the site attest to the presence of a small forge.

These traces represent important sources of information in the technical and operational production line for craft objects, whose material and symbolic value was immediately recognized by the warring societies. During The Great War, the early and abundant production (beginning in 1915) of these objects gave rise to competitions and exhibitions, including one that was entitled *The Art of War*, held from December 22, 1915 to February 22, 1916 in the Jeu de Paume rooms at the Tuileries. Even today it is not uncommon to see these craft assemblies in museums (for example in the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne), especially those produced from 1914-1918, which have become the repositories of what is now a shared memory, that of a conflict some considered to be a “European civil war.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

DESFOSSÉS, Yves, JACQUES, Alain, PRILAUX, Gilles, *L'archéologie de la Grande Guerre* (Paris/Rennes: INRAP/Éditions Ouest-France, 2008).

KIMBALL, Jane A., *Trench Art: An Illustrated History* (Davis: Silverpenny Press, 2004).

SAUNDERS, Nicholas J., *Trench Art: A Brief History & Guide, 1914-1939* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2001).

Source URL: <https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/wars-and-memories/objects-and-material-aspects-war/trench-art>