

From the Trenches to the Curio Cabinet

Soldier Folk Art Documents the Personal Side of War

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In the hands of the right man, a spent 75mm artillery shell is a potent medium of artistic expression.

Soldier-made trench art is a subcategory of what decorative arts scholars call folk art. Trench art objects are as varied and unique as the artists who created them but are unified by their use of materials readily available to soldier-craftsmen. Artillery shells, bullets, shrapnel, and even aircraft parts have all been transformed into one-of-a-kind pieces of folk art.



More commonly associated with WWI, the practice of fashioning useful and often ornate pieces from military scrap continued into the Second World War. During the previous conflict, however, soldiers—many of them with metalworking backgrounds—had unprecedented amounts of downtime. Stalemated in trenches between battles, soldiers on the frontlines could distract themselves during the long, fear-filled hours spent waiting for the enemy to attack.

During WWII, the Nazi's use of *blitzkrieg* tactics made the older trench-style warfare obsolete. An unintended consequence of this change in tactics was a decrease in the amount of soldier-made trench art—both in terms of quantity and stylistic diversity.

While soldiers serving in WWII may have had fewer opportunities to craft trench art, it was still a fairly common practice among soldiers and POWs. The current display at the Wright Museum, on view through the end of August, features several examples.



The largest of the group, probably dating to WWI, was fashioned from a 75mm artillery shell. Featuring raised relief flower and badge designs resting atop a fluted base, this distinctive vase bears many of the hallmarks of the art nouveau style in vogue during the early 1900s. Art historians would refer to this piece as an example of repoussé brass, referring to a relief technique executed by hammering or pushing the reverse side of a metal surface. Made by an anonymous artist, this piece is included in the display as a counterpoint to the less ornate pieces from WWII and was donated to the Wright Museum in 1997 by Mr. and Mrs. Howard Huxtable of Center Tuftonboro.



Also on view is a small folk art ashtray made from the base of a 75mm shell used during the Battle of Tarawa. Fought over several days in November, 1943 on a group of tiny equatorial islands about 1,400 miles north of Fiji, the battle represented America's second major offensive in the Pacific. The Japanese were well aware of the strategic value of these tiny islands and were well-prepared for an attack. Although greatly outmanned and equipped by the Americans, the Japanese were

well fortified and had gun posts at several potential landing areas. The souvenir of this battle is devoid of ornamentation but bears the inscription, "Tarawa, G.I. [Gilbert Islands], Nov. 20, 1943" and was donated to the museum by John and Evelyn Frank of Wolfeboro.

Even during the most treacherous moments of the war, some were mindful that they would want to take souvenirs home when the fighting was over. Wright Museum volunteer Dick Berg, a Motor Machinist 1st Class with the Navy, recalled, "While in Buckner Bay, Okinawa, we were firing our 3 inch/50 while Kamikazes were closing in. My battle station, damage control, was one deck down and I happened to go up for observation. The spent shells were a hazard rolling around all over the place, but our officer was shouting, 'Don't throw those darned shells over the edge, they'll make perfectly good ashtrays.'"

Some souvenirs could be classified as "found art"—objects that are interesting and have inherent value in and of themselves. One such example from the Wright Museum's collection is comprised of a cluster of M-1 Carbine rounds, melted together. Verne C. Edmunds, Maj. Inf. USAR, ret., retrieved this object in Belgium in 1945 after the war had ended in Europe.



Assignments took Edmunds to many of the battlefields of the Belgian Bulge. He recalls, "I came upon a thoroughly burned out American tank and inside I noted a blob of melted lead.



Apparently, some of the machine gun ammo had been set off by the heat and some rounds fell into the melted lead. When it cooled, here it was, hardened solid."

"I brought it home—I'm not sure why. I cleaned it up, painted it silver and mounted it on a small pine block. It's been a curio on my bookshelf for 50 years."

As art objects, pieces of trench offer a fascinating glimpse into the experiences of ordinary people living during extraordinary times. As souvenirs, they are often

laden with personal stories that are as unique as the individuals who brought them home.

Admission to the special display, on view in the Wright Museum's lobby during the month of 2007, is free. Gallery admission for the full museum tour is \$6 for adults and \$5 for seniors, veterans, and active U.S. servicemen and women; children under 8 are admitted to the museum free of charge. Visitors mentioning this article will receive special two-for-one admission. For more information and directions, call 603/569-1212 or visit www.wrightmuseum.org.

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