

Trench art from WWI

Gerald Prenderghast takes a look at the collectable art fashioned from the munitions of war



A beautifully made pair of shell cases commemorating the destruction of two French villages during WWI



Collection of repoussé shell cases, commemorating Verdun and the dates of the war (Collection of James Gordon-Cumming)



Repoussé work shell cases, from Paris souvenir shops (James Gordon-Cumming)



Another collection of shell cases, these pieces also commercially produced for souvenir shops (James Gordon-Cumming)



French troops engraving shell cases during a period in a rest area

War has been described by someone, who experienced the horrors of the trenches for himself, as consisting of months of boredom, punctuated by moments of extreme terror. This was especially true for soldiers on both sides during WWI and many of them filled in their periods of inactivity by creating what has come to be known to collectors as trench art. However, this art form does not just include objects made by soldiers in the front-line trenches but also articles made by anyone involved in the conflict or with access to recycled war materials. It is significant, perhaps, of the mood of the inter-war years and the fixation prevalent then with everything associated with WWI, that the industry associated with trench art from this period flourished from the beginning of the war in 1914, until the start of WWII.

Trench art was not a consequence of WWI, however. Decorative or utilitarian pieces produced from the detritus of battle first came to real prominence during the Napoleonic wars and were particularly characterised by objects originating with French POWs. Any sort of comfort was scarce in Britain's Napoleonic prisons and many of the inmates manufactured

models and similar items to exchange for food and clothing. Some of these pieces show considerable skill in their manufacture from what was quite unpromising material, such as meat bones or even plaited straw, and the practice was continued by British soldiers in the Crimea and troops from both sides during America's civil war.

This talent for using unusual and unpromising materials continued to be a feature of the trench art produced during WWI. Familiar objects picked up in the trenches were decorated or reshaped, using the simple tools to hand and included shell and cartridge cases, shrapnel, shell fragments, steel helmets, aircraft wreckage, even spent bullets found in the parapets. Life in the trenches did not lend itself to the careful, ornate work displayed by many of these pieces however, and the more sophisticated items were usually the products of men working in areas behind the lines. There also seems to have been a marked community effort behind much of this manufacturing in the trenches and rest areas. Servicemen skilled in welding or general metal work did the ornate work while others specialised in collecting material, or less demanding jobs like polishing, and, after completion, many of these pieces were exchanged for food, rum or



Desk lighter made from a .303 cartridge case, shown ready to operate (James Gordon-Cumming)

Desk lighter made from a small shell, shown in operational mode (James Gordon-Cumming)

A superb clock, the mountings made from two shell cases (Collection of James Gordon-Cumming)

Above: Shell cases decorated with the French generals Joffre and Foch (James Gordon-Cumming)

Left: Shell case showing repousse work and engraving (James Gordon-Cumming)

tobacco with the less skilful men who wanted a souvenir.

Recuperating servicemen and civilians were also involved in the trench art industry and many pieces were actually manufactured after the war by destitute Frenchmen or Germans scraping a living salvaging material from what had been the battlefields of WWI. Shops selling these objects were also set up at popular tourist centres on the battlefields and in Paris, where they offered a wide variety of commercially-produced trench art to tourists while, in England, London's Army and Navy store offered to turn shell cases, fuses and other objects into souvenirs, although for a fairly stiff price. Within months of the war's end, souvenirs from the trenches had become so popular that signs had to be posted in Ypres, prohibiting the collection of material from the town's shell-damaged buildings.

Unfortunately, most of the trench art from this period is unsigned, so identifying the artists who did the work is almost impossible. There was a very good reason for this anonymity, as shell cases and other military objects were the property of whatever government produced them, so anyone using such things for artistic purposes would technically be guilty of theft.

Shell and cartridge cases

Shells are the basis for, perhaps, the most frequently encountered and sophisticated form of trench art, the most commonly used cases in WWI being from 75, 77, 105, 155 and 210mm artillery pieces, the British 18pnd field gun, and some smaller naval guns. They range from a simple polished case used as a vase or similar container to ornately engraved or embossed objects, with many being worked into ornate shapes. Work was carried out using tools like a steel nail, employed as an engraver or punch, and some of the finest work of this sort was done by Turkish POWs who were experienced in producing engraved, and even inlaid, work of the highest quality with simple tools.

Floral designs, animals, unit badges, names and dates of significant battles, such as Verdun and the Somme, or images of tanks, aeroplanes, and artillery pieces were all used as decoration, some cases also bearing personal inscriptions or detailed accounts of a man's service. Similar images were also worked in relief on the outer surface of cases using a technique called repousse. This was far more complicated than engraving and some of it shows an almost miraculous attention to detail.

The shell case to be used was first carefully annealed, to increase the

ductility of the brass from which it was made, before being thinly lined with lead obtained from spent bullets or shrapnel. The exterior surface of the shell was then worked into the raised contours required by a series of punches, used in conjunction with a light hammer. Working from the inside of the case, the lead lining serving to spread the force of the punch and preventing the brass from tearing. These raised areas might then be chased to enhance the detail, before the finished object was given a final polish. Shells were also cut down to make tobacco jars, ashtrays and containers of other types, and some of the most ornate work is seen in those cases which were turned into oil lamps or jugs. Cartridge cases do not lend themselves to repousse work, but many will be found with ornate engraving or chasing similar to the larger shell cases. A favourite alternative, especially for German POWs, was the production of lighters from spent rounds. One method was to first close the top of the case sufficiently to hold a wick. Petrol soaked wadding was placed inside the case, adjacent to the wick, and the bottom was closed with a bolt shaped to the right size, the whole affair being lit by a flint-and-wheel device attached to the side. Original examples do not appear to have worked very well!

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An artistically decorated helmet from the trenches of WWI



Decorated doughboy's steel helmet (James Gordon-Cumming)



Collection of trench art paper knives made from a variety of materials (James Gordon-Cumming)



The heads of three paper knives produced from brass shell cases, showing the incredibly detailed chasing (James Gordon-Cumming)



A French Adrian helmet, typical of the pattern painted by the troops (Europaena 1914-1918 project)



A WWI trench art brass and aluminium tank letter rack and ink well mounted on a copper and wood base. The tank is driving through simulated barbed (Clarke's Auctions)



Lighters in different designs, made from a variety of materials (Collection of James Gordon-Cumming)

VALUES

Values for these worked shells are difficult to estimate, because so much depends upon the quality of the workmanship and the provenance, if any, associated with piece.

Expect to pay about £25 for a relatively simple example, with prices rising to £250 for something with more ornate features. Matching pairs of oil lamps, jugs or vases may fetch as much as £500. Modern replicas also start at about £25.

Cartridge case lighters fetch between £20 and £100, with modern replicas in the same price range.

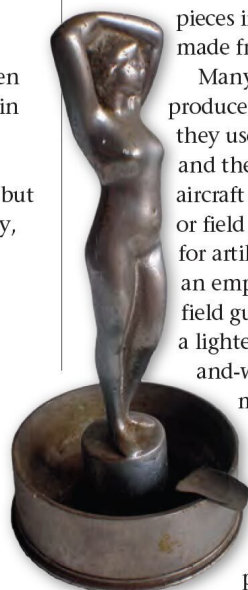
Other items produced from shell cases are even more difficult to price but generally values will reflect originality, workmanship and provenance.

Other metal objects

Paper knives were another common subject produced by the trench artist. Easy to craft from brass, steel, wood and even bone, a number of these

An ashtray, incorporating a figurine, made from a 25pnd shell casing

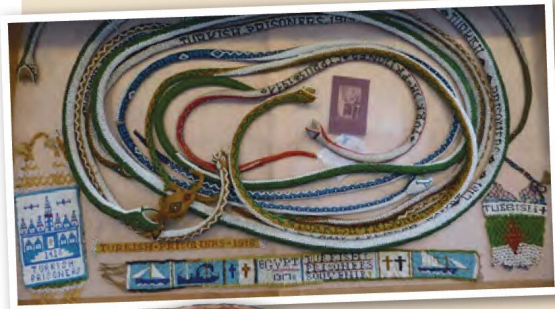
pieces are found with engraving giving the history of the maker's service or commemorating a friend's death, dates and names of battles, or artistic designs. Some examples also show intricate relief carving or incorporate military insignia. Shell cases did not escape the art of the letter opener either, and there are numerous examples which have been hammered and shaped out of the brass obtained from this source, with some pieces incorporating a handle made from a cartridge case.



Many servicemen also produced models of the vehicles they used during the fighting and these included tanks, aircraft and even submarines or field guns. A popular form for artillery pieces was to use an empty rifle case to model a field gun which also served as a lighter, the case with its flint-and-wheel attachment being mounted horizontally on a carriage before fixing to a polished or stained wooden mounting block, which often bore an inscribed brass plate. More mundane

items of equipment were also used, with steel helmets being particularly favoured. Hand-painted helmets might bear divisional, regimental or unit insignia, camouflage designs or military and patriotic images together with dates and details of service. Elaborately painted American, French and camouflaged German helmets are fairly common although decorated British helmets are harder to find.

Aluminium castings are another common feature of trench art, simple brooches, rings and other types of jewellery being made by scraping the desired shape into dry sand or earth, then pouring melted aluminium into the mould and leaving it to cool. These were often trench art in the strictest sense, such castings being fairly easy to produce under the conditions endured in the front lines, although pieces were also produced from aluminium salvaged from crashed Zeppelins and specifically allocated to injured servicemen for this purpose. One specific collection of this sort was made from a Zeppelin shot down over England and turned into souvenir objects, whose sale benefitted employees of the London and North-Western Railway wounded in the war.



Collection beaded belts and badges made by Turkish prisoners (James Gordon-Cumming)



A variety of bone carvings (James Gordon-Cumming)



A plaited straw box made by a French POW in the Napoleonic wars (Collection of James Gordon-Cumming)



Clock made from the central boss of an RAF aircraft (James Gordon-Cumming)

A beaded casket from WWI was up for auction with an upper estimate of £200 (Hannam's Auctioneers)



Unusual piece of trench art, a chestnut embossed with the name of the artist's child (Europaena 1914-1918 project)

VALUES

Difficult to estimate and will depend as usual on material, originality of design, workmanship and any provenance attached to the piece.

Paper knives fetch £20-£30 for an original piece and £10-£20 for a replica.

Steel helmets may fetch £400-£3,000, depending upon condition, workmanship and any provenance associated with it.

Other types of trench art

Wooden pieces are also commonly found as trench art, boxes of various sort from the wood of ships or aircraft being a common find. Models of aircraft and other vehicles were also produced, together with more unusual objects such as clocks cased in the boss of an aircraft propeller. Wooden objects associated with ships from either the Royal Navy or Imperial German Navy are particularly sought after and their history will ensure they fetch a premium in any sale. Animal bones were also used, the largest bones from commissary bullocks being especially popular.

Objects using beadwork and embroidery were frequently made by wounded or disabled servicemen as a way of occupying their time and raising a little money to support themselves. Subjects reflect the history of these men and are found as embroidered service badges or belts as well as postcards produced by French civilians. Some of these pieces were also produced as beadwork, with work of a particularly fine quality being done by Turkish POWs.

VALUES

Even more dependent upon style and workmanship than usual. RFC or RAF aircraft propeller clocks fetch £350-£3,000, with replicas starting at about £100.

Trench art is a convenient, relatively inexpensive field for the collector interested in the more unusual features of WWI memorabilia, although with increasing popularity prices are going up. Pieces produced during WWI show an endless variety, tobacco boxes, cigarette cases, matchbox covers, even crucifixes being

crafted out of shell cases or other battlefield remains, with prices to suit all pockets. Most collectable are named pieces, such as those made for identified RFC pilots, or trench art connected to particular regiments or naval ships. Campaigns are another aspect collectors focus on, Gallipoli, the Middle East, the Somme, or Ypres 1917 all being of particular interest. There is also a considerable market in replica pieces, some of which do not cost much less than the originals so care needs to be exercised. ■

i FURTHER READING

- **The UK Trench Art site**
www.trenchart.co.uk
This is an excellent website for both beginner and expert, run by James Gordon-Cumming.
- **Trench Art of the Great War and related souvenirs**
www.trenchart.org
Another good site with an extensive image collection.
- **Imperial War Museum**
www.iwm.org.uk/history/beauty from the battlefield
A neatly arranged section of this site with some good pictures.