



**SUPPLY
LINE**

Artifact Backgrounder

Trench Art

DEFINITION

Trench art encompasses an eclectic range of decorative and functional objects created by soldiers, civilians and commercial firms during and after the First World War. Although **trench art**, as a term, emerged from the First World War period, conflicts from the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century to the present day have generated comparable objects.

DID YOU KNOW?

From the interwar period through to the middle of the 20th century, **trench art** was arguably one of the most common cultural expressions of the First World War experience to be found in the homes of veterans, as well as families who had lost loved ones in the conflict. However, when veterans and their immediate families aged and died away, countless trench art pieces were thrown out with the trash, as their original meanings were lost to subsequent generations. Only recently have military historians and art experts begun to examine and understand the cultural roles that **trench art** played during and after the First World War.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Trench art pieces from the First World War period were typically made from locally available recycled war materials. Brass cartridge cases, small arms ammunition, grenades, artillery shell fragments and various mechanical parts were common. **Trench art** was often purely decorative, but some pieces also served practical functions that were different from the material's original purposes. For example, empty brass cartridge cases were converted into ornate napkin rings or holders. Not all **trench art** pieces, however, were made using metals

or recycled military objects. Commonly available materials such as wood, bone, stone, glass and cloth were also used.

Some mass-produced everyday objects were converted into **trench art** while preserving their original practical functions. For example, a soldier might engrave pictures or words on his aluminum canteen. The decorated canteen was still a container for water, but it was also a piece of **trench art** because it had been decorated in a way that reflected its owner's war experience.

EVOLUTION/DEVELOPMENT

Trench art can be classified into three broad categories:

- Pieces created by soldiers
- Pieces created by civilians
- Pieces created commercially

The first category includes items made by soldiers in the battlefield area, in prisoner-of-war camps, or in hospitals. Output from soldiers represented the smallest proportion of First World War-period pieces. In other words, relatively little **trench art** was created in the trenches!

Soldiers' **trench art** pieces typically were practical items, such as decorated brass matchbox covers or cigarette lighters made from empty small arms cartridge cases. Religious symbols and talismans were also typical of soldiers' **trench art**.

Civilians were responsible for the greatest volume of **trench art** during and after the war. These objects tended to be more decorative than functional. The civilian makers of such objects were sometimes highly skilled artisans and metalworkers, who turned out large volumes

of goods from readily available material for sale to soldiers during the war, and also for sale to battlefield tourists during the 1920s and 1930s.

Commercially-made **trench art** pieces, of the third category, were generally produced after the war, primarily in Britain, Belgium, France and Germany. Such pieces were often custom made for veterans by specialist firms using raw materials that the veterans provided. For instance, a veteran who had saved parts from grenades or ammunition might have the pieces integrated into a decorative inkwell or ashtray for his desk. In one remarkable instance, a Canadian officer who had been wounded by falling stained glass from a Belgian church window saved a coloured shard depicting two hands folded in prayer and had it mounted in a decorative wooden plaque. Once again, the specific materials were less important than how the pieces reflected an individual's experience.

VOCABULARY LIST

- Artillery:** Weapons that use mechanical or explosive (chemical) energy to project munitions over distances ranging from hundreds of meters to dozens of kilometers. Generally speaking, any device that fires a projectile with a calibre (diameter) of 2 cm or greater is considered an artillery weapon.
- Brass cartridge cases:** Cylindrical containers of various sizes that formed the basic structure of modern ammunition as of the late 19th century. A cartridge case contains the explosive propellant that actually fires a bullet, as well as a primer charge that ignites the propellant.
- Small arms ammunition:** Any type of ammunition fired from small arms. Small arms are hand-held weapons such as pistols or rifles that use an explosion to shoot a bullet from a tube (known as a barrel).
- Talisman:** An object, such as a piece of jewelry, that is understood to have supernatural powers that can protect its owner from harm, as with a good luck charm.