

In Air and Fire

War Artists, the Battle of Britain
and the Blitz

Temporary art exhibition
at the RAF Museum

Teacher pack

KS2: Art and History

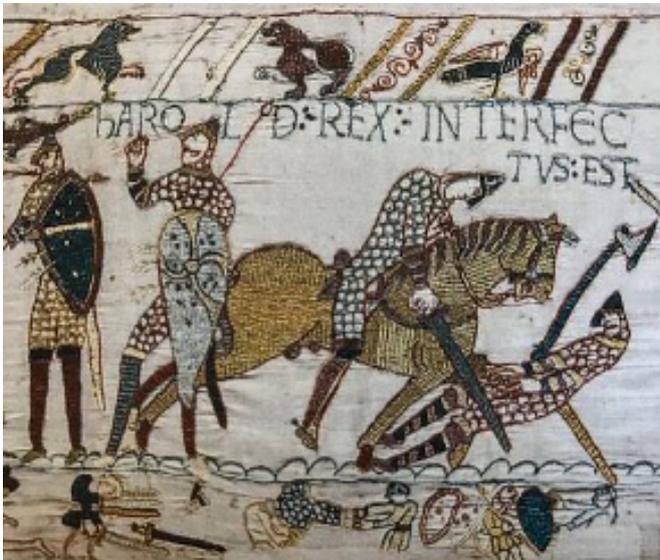
Art and History

For thousands of years, humans have used their creative skills to produce art: to explore their world and imagination, to tell stories and to express ideas and emotions.

Art can also leave a visual record of events of the past.

Battles and warfare have existed throughout human history, so it is not surprising that many artists have chosen to depict war.

One of the most famous examples is the Bayeux Tapestry, which tells the story of the Norman invasion and the fight for the English throne.



Myrabella, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Art in the Second World War

During the Second World War many artists were employed by the War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC) as Official War Artists. Producing around 6,000 works in total, they were paid by the Government to record events or highlight aspects of war work. The WAAC also selectively purchased works from a wider range of artists outside of the Official War Artist commissioning scheme.

Mostly, these works were acquired for the nation to build up a lasting 'artistic record' of the war. However, some were used by the Government for propaganda (giving out messages they hoped would help the war effort), such as to encourage support from nations abroad. Exhibitions of the works were put on to keep up public morale and champion the war work of ordinary people.

Not all the artworks in our exhibition were produced as Official War Art. Thousands of professional and amateur artists took inspiration from the strange new world they were living in.

Along with photographs and film footage, paintings, drawings and sculpture can help bring the Second World War to life. While most films and photos of the time were black and white, artists in the Second World War could choose to produce their works in full colour. They could also communicate their personal perspectives on the war by choosing certain subjects to represent in different artistic styles, conveying mood.



Original wartime caption: Mr. Eric Kennington, the famous war artist, at work on a portrait of Flight Lieutenant Mungo-Park, who shared in bringing down the 600th enemy aircraft to fall victim of a single Fighter Station.

© IWM CH 1878. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205443113>

How to study an artwork

This is a simple exercise that you can use with your group to help them study any artwork.

It is also useful when you want to use an artwork as a historical source – in this case, finding out more about life in the Second World War.

Exercise

1. Describe what you can see in the artwork – e.g. objects, colours, people, places, size (be careful not to describe what you think you can see).
2. Now go a bit deeper. What do you already know about the time period (in this case the Second World War)? When was the artwork made? Who is the artist? What is the title? What other information can you easily find out in the exhibition?
3. Finally, put these ideas together to interpret what the painting is about and why the artist might have made it.

Share and discuss ideas with partners or in groups.

Premonition: Walter Nessler

This is a great painting to start with, as it demonstrates why you shouldn't jump to conclusions about what you are looking at.

At first glance this looks like a scene from the Blitz, with damaged buildings, a fire red sky and a gas mask.

In fact, it was painted in 1937, two years before the Second World War began.

As the title suggests, this painting **predicts** what London might look like if the country goes to war.

When the Nazi party came to power in Germany in 1933, many people across Europe worried that a new war looked more likely. Artist Walter Nessler was one of them.

He witnessed the expansion of the German military and realised Hitler was getting the country ready to go to war. Like many other artists in Germany at the time, Walter didn't agree with Hitler's ideas. The Nazi party mistreated many people in Germany, including Walter's friends. This meant it became too dangerous for him to stay in his home country and he fled to Britain in 1937.

In the exhibition

Class exercise

Give the group 30 seconds to look at the painting (without reading the caption), then ask what they think it is about.

Follow the three steps to studying an artwork:

- Describe what you can see
- Go a bit deeper
- Put these ideas together.

Ask your group why they think Walter Nessler might have painted this artwork.

(As a warning of what was to come or maybe to express his own worries about the future.)

Discuss whether you think his vision of the future was accurate.



A London Transport Underground Station: Olga Lehmann

Olga Lehmann was not an Official War Artist, but she was given permission by the War Office to visit bomb sites to make sketches of the damage she could see all around her.

She also sketched the ARP (Air Raid Precautions) staff going about their work. This sketch shows people sheltering in a tube station during an Air Raid.

Olga's own home in Hampstead, London was destroyed by a bomb during the Blitz.



In the exhibition

Class exercise

Follow the three steps to studying an artwork:

- Describe what you can see
- Go a bit deeper
- Put these ideas together.

Find the other artworks showing people sheltering in tube stations. What is similar about each work? What is different?

Ask your group to discuss why they think lots of artists chose this as a subject for their artworks.

Maybe this was something they had experienced themselves or that many people could identify with. It could be about showing that there were places of safety during the war.

Follow up activity

1. Discover the wartime work of one of Britain's most famous artists, Henry Moore. Like Olga Lehmann, he chose to draw and paint scenes within air raid shelters. Also like Olga, his house in Hampstead was damaged by a bomb.

2. Make some sketches of your everyday life in the style of Olga Lehmann or Henry Moore.

- They use outlines to show the rough shapes of people, rather than concentrating on details, like facial features.
- They use continuous lines, drawing rapidly to develop figurative forms.

Squadron Leader R Sawrey-Cookson: Eric Kennington

Eric Kennington was an Official War Artist and from August 1940 he was asked to produce artworks for the Air Ministry. He travelled across Britain to different RAF stations and drew many portraits of RAF staff. By the time the war ended, more than 40 of the men whose portraits he had created had been killed.

The subject of the artwork is Wing Commander Reginald Sawrey-Cookson. He was in charge of No. 75 Squadron

which flew Wellington bomber aircraft, and in November 1940 he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross medal for a particularly difficult mission to destroy German planes lined up on an airfield.

Reginald was one of Eric's 40 plus portrait sitters who didn't survive the war. His Wellington was shot down over Germany on 6 April 1942. Reginald was killed along with the rest of the crew.



In the exhibition

Class exercise

Follow the three steps to studying an artwork. As this is a portrait, it is good for thinking about identity.

- Describe what you can see
- Go a bit deeper.

Your group may need more help with this one so ask if there is anything about the portrait that could tell them something about the person.

- The colour of the hat shows it is someone in the RAF rather than the Army or the Navy! The badge on it also has small gold wings
 - The outline of the badge on his chest is the shape of two wings, this shows he was a pilot
 - The expression on his face looks quite serious, maybe showing his job has a lot of responsibility or is dangerous.
- Put these ideas together.

Squadron Leader R Sawrey-Cookson: Eric Kennington



Around the Museum

1. There are some RAF uniforms on display in the Museum. See if you can find a pilot's uniform. Remember, they have a badge with two wings on the chest
2. Find the Lancaster aircraft in Hangar 5. It is about the same size as Reginald's Wellington aircraft and it was used for similar missions.

Follow up activity

Draw a self-portrait. It should tell the person looking at it something about you. This could be a favourite hobby or subject at school.

- ◀ 1920 pattern uniform jacket of Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Cyril Newall, from 1940.

Further resources

For the exhibition, In Air and Fire: War Artists the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, we have developed a playlist of topical films on themes including government commissioning of Official War Art, women war artists, creative practices then and now, and in-focus discussions on individual wartime artists. These are being released gradually across the duration of the exhibition, so keep looking out for updates! [Click here](#)

- For more school resources from the RAF Museum [Click here](#)