

# The Art in War: Exploring Trench Art, its Materiality, and the Human Side of War

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## Preface

Warfare timelessly associates itself with objects of death and destruction. Whether they manifest themselves as armaments or ammunition, these objects only help in facilitating man's destructive instincts and fueling the flames of war. While many concede that these objects are merely expressions of man's cold, technological ingenuity, I argue that they can also be repurposed for expressing one's humanity in face of the cruel realities of warfare. Thus, this paper seeks to examine trench art, a longstanding practice of transforming materiel<sup>1</sup> into artwork, utilitarian objects, and even symbolic monuments. By investigating trench art in a material cultural context, we gain a better understanding of the human side of warfare, as seen through the lenses of soldiers, prisoners of war, and civilians that create these art pieces.

Trench art, despite its namesake association with the trenches of WWI, does not originate with the Great War. In fact, trench art has existed as early as the fifth century and has since then become an important byproduct of countless conflicts (Saunders 1). One of the earliest instances of trench art can be found in present-day Istanbul, Turkey. There, at the Hippodrome of Constantinople, lies the Serpent Column, "a three-headed sculpture of intertwined snakes" (Saunders 17). In 479 BC, the Greeks erected the Serpent Column to celebrate their victory over the Persian army at the Battle of

Plataea. The Serpent Column's status as trench art is determined by its materiel composition, which consists of melted-down bronze armor captured from the defeated Persians.

During this time period, however, trench art had not yet become prevalent and it would not gain popularity until more modern conflicts greatly intensified its practice. As such, for the purpose of this paper, I will be primarily focusing on trench art during contemporary conflicts such as WWI and WWII, when the practice became more prominent on a personal level. In addition, I will also refer to trench art in conflicts with which we normally do not associate it such as the Vietnam War. As I discuss trench art during these conflicts, I shall examine it through the lenses of a soldier, a POW, and a civilian. These three parties had very unique circumstances, purposes, and messages, which they conveyed by creating trench art.

## Section 1 – Utilities and Coping Mechanisms: Soldiers and Trench Art

The outbreak of WWI and the technological marvels that developed from this international conflict left many both awed and horrified at man's destructive potential. Through our keen intellect and creativity, we produced many devastating machinations such as tanks, railway guns, howitzers, machineguns, and even chemical weapons. These weapon systems would become synonymous with the Great War and would spark a revolution for future weapons development. Despite the technological advancements of WWI, the military tactics and strategies of yesteryear failed to accommodate these new inventions. As a result, opposing armies were forced into a stalemate of trench warfare. Open combat of Napoleonic proportions was no longer feasible and the tactics of maneuverable "block-fighting"<sup>2</sup>, paired with

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<sup>2</sup> During the Napoleonic-era, armies would often move as a block-like formation to help maximize their firepower output, since early firearms were smoothbore and inaccurate.

<sup>3</sup> No-man's land was the area in between opposing trenches. No army strategically owned this land, hence the name. This

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<sup>1</sup> Materiel refers to military materials and equipment.

machine guns and artillery, rendered any frontal engagement as suicidal.

Campaigns would end up taking years, as either side remained entrenched, hoping to outlast one another. Periodically, large-scale assaults would be mounted on an opposing trench line, wherein an attacking force would disembark from their trenches en-masse, charging into no man's land.<sup>3</sup> Many of these attempts were disastrous with men in the millions perishing to land mines, artillery, machine gun fire, and mustard gas. It would appear that the Great War had become the Great Bloody Massacre.

However, long campaigns meant extended free time to the troops hunkering in the trenches as they waited for the signal to mount another perilous assault. The claustrophobic and decrepit living conditions of trench life yielded few amenities and activities. In their spare time, soldiers were limited to sleeping, cleaning their weapons, eating, and writing to their loved ones. Soldiers sought to produce trench art in order to escape the momentary boredom of trench life.

### **Section 1.1 – Practical Trench Art**

With an abundance of spent shell casings, scrap metal, and other materiel, soldiers were able to craft a variety of items for practicality, personal amusement, and spiritual comfort. Trench art during WWI came in many forms and usually reflected its creators' needs and circumstances. For example, a soldier, perhaps an officer, may have required a writing utensil to correspond with loved ones or a letter opener to open letters during mail call. In many cases, the soldier or officer would fashion a letter opener or a pen out of scrap metal and ammunition casings. Appendix A offers several examples of trench art letter openers and writing utensils made during the Great War.

Trench art letter openers varied by design with some being more ornate than others, which likely reflected the individual's skillset or personal preferences. Since both Central<sup>3</sup> and Allied soldiers came from various socio-economic backgrounds, we can expect different levels of craftsmanship. If we refer to Figure 1 in Appendix A, we can see that the crescent-bladed letter openers were crafted with extreme precision down to the minute detailing of the blade engravings. Figure 2 is far more simplistic, sporting very little detail save for a German iron cross. This piece of trench art implies that its creator either lacked the skillset to make an ornate one compared to Figure 1 or that he did not desire anything ornate.

In addition to letter openers, soldiers also made other practical items to facilitate daily aspects of their lives. One such aspect was smoking, a habit picked up by many troops throughout the War and one that would continue into current operations. Smoking helped calm a soldier's nerves, especially if he was suffering from shellshock, the proto-post WWII diagnosis for PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In addition to providing some form of psychological tranquility, smoking stimulated troops, keeping them alert should they be ushered into battle at a moment's notice. Troops would sometimes take scrap metal from enemy and allied materiel to fashion ashtrays for discarding cigarettes. Others would produce ornate metal cases to protect their cigarettes from moisture damage, as it would rain quite often on the Western Front. Older soldiers would even fashion metal smoking pipes to serve as a personal souvenir as well as a reusable smoking platform. Please refer to Appendix B for examples of trench art ashtrays, cigarette cases, and smoking pipes.

In many cases, these examples of the trench art allowed soldiers to circumvent both logistical and requisition restrictions in the military. Items such as writing utensils or even cigarette cases were

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long stretch of land was often riddled with artillery craters and landmines.

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<sup>3</sup> The Central Powers primarily refers to the Austria-Hungary, the German Empire, and the Kingdom of Serbia.

considered more or less novelty items that were disregarded by the military's supply chain. As such, acquiring such luxury items became both difficult and expensive. Trench art helped alleviate this issue and gave soldiers what they needed, thus enhancing their mundane lifestyles to more bearable conditions.

## **Section 1.2 – Hobby and Artistic Trench Art: Artillery Shells**

While many troops practiced trench art for utilitarian reasons, others would embrace trench art as a hobby and transform existing materiel into small trinkets, jewelry, vehicle models, and even functioning instruments. Perhaps one of the more popular forms of leisurely trench art was the decorative artillery shell. During the Great War, the massive amount of discarded artillery shells left troops with an abundant supply with which they could forge their masterpieces. Artillery shell trench art, or “shell art” as I like to call it, was practiced by both Allied and Central troops of different backgrounds and skillsets, many of whom made these artworks for a variety of reasons. Shell art was most practiced on the Western Front, where trench warfare had intensified. One could expect these art pieces to vary in both skill and sophistication, as was the case with those made by copper workers who joined the Belgian Army. Many of these workers were “consummate metalsmiths”, who had transferred their preWar skills into trench art (Saunders 51). Appendix C contains samples of WWI-era shell art, many of which will vary in both style and purpose.

You will have noticed that some examples of shell art share similar characteristics, particularly in how the artillery shell was given an hourglass shape. This was achieved through a popular decorative technique known as “corsetting”, which involved fluting the lower half of an artillery shell. According to Nicholas J. Saunderson's *Trench Art: Second Edition*, corsetting could be achieved by several means. One common method was to heat

the artillery shell with molten lead to allow some pliability and then use a “specially shaped wooden punch” to hammer against the insides of the shell (Saunders 57). After all desired decorations were applied to the shell, it would be reheated again to remove the punch and allow for finalization. Some of the higher quality shell art was difficult to produce due to the lack of necessary skillset or tools. In some cases, shell art could only be produced in the rear lines by the likes of combat engineers, who usually had immediate access to machine tools and molten lead.

Another key feature of shell art is the distinct designs and engravings. Many of these shell art pieces were often decorated with pastoral motifs such as “flowers, leaves, and romanticized images of women” (Saunders 57). Such imagery reflected the ideals of “art nouveau”, a popular neoclassical art style that emerged during the 1890s, which heavily emphasized nature and feminine beauty (Saunders 57). In addition to reflecting trending art styles, shell art also incorporated landscape or landmark designs, as is the case in Figure 11, which shows an artillery shell featuring a relatively detailed rendition of the Basilica at Albert on the Somme.

Based on the examples of shell art that we have seen, we can interpret the purpose of each artifact or even deduce the background of its creator. If we examine Figures 12-14, we can deduce that the creators were art nouveau enthusiasts who wanted to produce artwork that was reflective of trending art styles. By looking at Figure 15, we can observe an artillery shell that was decorated with a motif of Alsace-Lorraine, a piece of land with contested Franco-German identities. We can assume that the creator was either of French or German nationality and that shell art served as a bold statement to claim Alsace-Lorraine as either rightful French or German territory.

In Figure 16, the artillery shell is decorated with the Flanders Lion, the coat of arms of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern portion of

Belgium. This indicates the background of the creator, who we can likely assume is Flemish or at least of Belgian descent. It also indicates that he might have created this trench art as a form of communal pride, possibly one drawn from nostalgia for one's homeland. It could be that the creator intended for this particular artwork to be sent back home as a souvenir or as reassurance to his loved ones of his survival.

These are among the many interpretations, which we as viewers can make through examining these artifacts. Shell art, among other forms of leisurely trench art, reflected the skillsets of its creators and their cultural or national background. Some trench art pieces were more ornate than others based on the availability of tools needed to produce it. Regardless, shell art all share common characteristics through their expression of trending art styles, environmental observations, nostalgia, and national pride.

### **Section 1.3 – Hobby and Artistic Trench Art: Jewelry**

In addition to shell art, hand crafted jewelry was also pervasive throughout WWI and WWII. While it is doubtful that any of these items were of utilitarian value, many soldiers would still often craft these objects either because they had the spare time to engage in these activities or were personally compelled to craft something out of emotional endearment. Jewelry was easily one of the more popular forms of metal-based trench art. It often had very personal and emotional connections and contributed to the “remaking of individual identity” (Saunders 92). One of the more common jewelry pieces made by troops was a finger ring, which was produced by soldiers from all nations.

According to Saunders in his earlier work, *Trench Art: Materialities and Memories of War*, active soldiers such as the Belgians would make finger rings from aluminum fuses and washers salvaged from discarded German artillery shells. These rings would often be sold on the black

market, bartered for something of equal or greater value, or sent home to wives and loved ones. Wounded soldiers also enjoyed fashioning trench art rings in their inactivity due to the relative ease in making them. Please refer to Appendix D for examples of trench art finger rings and jewelry.

### **Section 1.4 – Hobby and Artistic Trench Art: Models**

While rings were considered some of the more simplistic forms of leisurely trench art, more complex trench art such as miniature models tended to require exceptional levels of skill and patience to properly produce. Models in particular were usually meant to reflect the various technological marvels of one's time. During WWI, troops would often make metal models of tanks and bi-planes in various sizes. Often, these models were made with brass and shell casings, depending on what was available to the soldier at the time. During WWII, soldiers would produce their models after fighter planes like the P-38 Lightning. The Vietnam War saw the first widespread usage of helicopters and so some troops would make models based off the titular UH-1 Huey helicopter. Please refer to Appendix E for different model vehicles as they were made across WWI, WWII, and the Vietnam War.

### **Section 1.5 – Hobby and Artistic Trench Art: Instruments**

Though trench art models and rings may have appealed to the individual's desire for extra cash, lovesickness, and craftiness, the creation of trench art musical instruments appealed to the group. War can be psychologically damaging and isolating to the individual, but in the warmth of comradery, group cohesion and morale can help one maintain his psyche. Music has remained an integral part of warfare. During the Napoleonic era, fife and drummers would often play tunes to help pace troops as they marched into battle. During an



engagement, the tune would change to notify troops when to advance, hold position, or retreat. Music in the modern context of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century conflicts sought to boost troop morale. For example, during WWII, various record companies would ship musical records to troops called V-discs, which contained a motley collection of popular songs, for soldiers' listening pleasures via record player. These discs would often be played at nightclubs where troops would visit while on leave.

However, out on the battlefield, such luxuries were scarce, so troops would often rely upon compact instruments that they either made or found. Such was also the case in WWI and Vietnam. Using wood, wiring, and other available materials, troops could produce a makeshift stringed instrument. If a soldier was lucky, he could sometimes obtain a harmonica. Many of these instruments, especially those made through trench art techniques, were used to play songs that would not only uplift soldiers in times of distress, but also tell abstract stories of their troubles and the sociopolitical climate around them. Usually, the homemade trench instruments would reflect the cultural background of the soldier and the style of music he preferred such as in Figure 25 in Appendix F, which likely implies an American creator with ties to the South.

### **Section 1.6 – Religious Trench Art**

When the leisurely joys of music failed to comfort the soldier, he would often look towards religion for solace. Religion provided troops with spiritual security, reassuring them they were protected from harm. Wars have always necessitated the need for religion either as a justification for conflict or as a spiritual beacon for divine intervention. The latter became quite relevant when we consider man's technological investments in the global war machine. The mechanization of ground warfare, the devastation of precision munitions, and the harnessing of chemical weaponry all resulted in massive combat fatalities. The sheer number of deaths per engagement complemented by the visual carnage of the dead imprinted a deep, psychological scar for those previously sheltered or

unaware of such sights. For many who were shell shocked by these terrifying weapons, religion offered a safe retreat from the horrors of war.

During WWI and onwards, the army chaplain would serve as this safe retreat, acting as a homing beacon for troops, where he blessed them with protection before they embarked on a dangerous mission. Additionally, the chaplain acted as a comforter for those on their deathbeds. However, some troops, especially those wary of their impending demise, believed they required more than a chaplain's blessing. To enhance their spiritual protection, many troops, if they did not already own one, would craft crucifixes out of scrap metal and materiel and carry these crucifixes into battle. Much like a talisman, these crucifixes reassured soldiers that there was still light amidst the hopelessness of the Great War. Please refer to Appendix G for an example of a typical trench art crucifix that soldiers would have likely carried into battle.

### **Section 1.7 – Niche Trench Art: Sweetheart Grips**

It should be interesting to note that the production of these personal talismans would continue across various conflicts beyond the Great War, where the advancement of military technology and the massive death toll they incur, would only further necessitate the need for spiritual protection. While crucifixes and other personalized trench art would continue to be made or carried by troops across both world wars, and in Vietnam, the advent of WWII saw the popularization of a niche form of trench art called sweetheart grips. This new variation of trench art involved the synthesis of firearms and traditional trench art. The idea was to remove the existing wood grips on a handgun, replacing them with Plexiglas<sup>4</sup> versions of said grips. Then, a cropped photo of a loved one would be inserted behind one of the Plexiglas grips, turning the handgun into a portable picture frame, albeit one that shoots.

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<sup>4</sup> Service members making sweetheart grips would often acquire Plexiglas from fighter plane and bomber cockpits.

Sweetheart grips were meant to keep a soldier's memory of his spouse or loved one close to his person, preferably to his heart, where some pistols were sometimes kept via shoulder holster. The idea of synthesizing a tool for war and a picture frame of a loved one seemed to imbue the sense that the picture subject was protecting its wielder in combat, much like how a crucifix would divinely protect its carrier in battle. Additionally, the sweetheart grip might have also indicated the intensity of a soldier's devotion to his loved ones and his desire to return home safely. In many cases, this sweetheart-gripped handgun would act as a lucky charm for that soldier as he fought overseas.

Sweetheart grips were immensely popular among all soldiers, particularly American service members. These customized grips would often be seen on handguns issued to pilots, tankers, and officers, all of whom carried it for both personal protection and social status. However, other soldiers not relegated to these positions would soon begin carrying handguns themselves and would also follow the sweetheart grip trend.

The concept of sweetheart grips was that it was never limited to just standard issue handguns. During WWII, the most popular souvenir among American soldiers was the Luger P08 and Nambu Type 14 handgun, commonly carried by German and Imperial Japanese officers respectively. Many American soldiers would often scavenge for them after a battle, hoping to bring one home as a war trophy. Soldiers would sometimes further personalize these captured trophies with sweetheart grips. While WWII may have inspired the mass practice of personalizing one's weapons, the practice can also be traced back to a particular case in WWI.

A soldier in the Royal 22<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the Canadian Army by the name of Henry Lecorre had personalized his Lee Enfield rifle with engravings bearing the names of various battles his unit had fought. The rifle, affectionately named Rosalie, is currently on display at the Royal 22<sup>nd</sup> Regiment's

museum in Quebec. Appendix H contains several examples of sweetheart grips found on several WWII-era or issued sidearms.

## **Section 2 – Pastimes in Captivity: Internees, POWs, and Trench Art**

Trench art was not limited to just the active or wounded soldier. Even those in captivity, both military and civilian, became engrossed in trench art. Unlike on the battlefield, the supply of metal scraps at POW and internment camps was relatively scarce. Thus, the POW and civilian internee did not fully embrace the *Zeitgeist*<sup>5</sup> of metal-based trench art. Instead, many found alternatives through wood and bone-based trench art.

### **Section 2.1 – German Internment Trench Art**

Though POWs have long remained a common byproduct in the aftermath of a military operation, we rarely ever hear about civilians as prisoners themselves. When we do hear about civilian prisoners, especially through such wordage as internment, our first association is with the Japanese Americans during WWII. However, internment has in fact preceded that notion. During the Great War, the British, driven by fears of domestic espionage, interned countless German aliens. According to Harold Maytum's, *A Tale of Two Treatments: The Materiality of Internment on the Isle of Man in World Wars I and II*, the most notable location of German internment and later a source for civilian trench art was at the Isle of Man, a "Crown Dependency" or self-governing possession of the Crown (Maytum 36). This new internment site would be comprised of two camps: Douglas Camp and Knockaloe Camp. For the purpose of this section, we shall be focusing primarily on Knockaloe Camp, its inhabitants, and their trench art creations. Additionally, we shall also discuss Japanese American internee trench art

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<sup>5</sup> The term "*Zeitgeist*" (spirit of the time) refers to the dominant set of ideals and beliefs that motivate the actions of members of a society in particular time period.

as well as touch briefly upon notable POW trench art during WWII.

According to Maytum's research, the majority of Knockaloe internees were Germans who had immigrated to Britain, married local women, and had children, many of whom were fighting in the British Army (Maytum 41). In addition to German internees, there were also Austrians, Hungarians, and Turks. This intermingling of Central Power nationalities within the confines of the internment camp created a new national identity for its inhabitants. Amidst a media censorship campaign imposed on Knockaloe Camp, internees would often protest their confinement and the growing xenophobic sentiment towards them, by using trench art to disguise their contempt as well as to escape the dreariness of forced internment.

One popular form of trench art practiced by the German internees was carved animal bone vases. Many of these vases were usually carved from ox or cow bone, both of which were abundant in the camp as beef and oxen was a staple food source. These carved bone vases would often convey "escapist or uncontentious designs", which functioned as a form of protest to confinement (Maytum 43). Much like shell art, bone art was very similar in the themes it portrayed. Its creators would often utilize pastoral motifs such as flowers and branches when decorating their vases. In addition, the vases themselves varied by bone quality and beauty, based on the skillsets of its makers. According to Saunders, the better-quality bone was often reserved for more "accomplished artists" (Saunders 121). There also seemed to be a hierarchical system regarding the types of flowers used on the vases. For example, novice carvers would prefer "simple outlines of tulips" whereas a master carver would attempt an "ornate representation of roses as buds" and "full flower[s]", accompanied by "folded leaves and petals" (Saunders 121). Please refer to Appendix I for an example of bone art.

## Section 2.2 – Japanese Internment Trench Art

Civilian trench art would continue in practice with Japanese American internees during WWII, albeit with greater access to different materials. Under the directives of Executive Order 9066, Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps under suspicions of espionage, following the surprise Pearl Harbor attack by the Imperial Japanese Navy. Many interned Japanese Americans would indulge themselves in trench art, taking raw materials and transforming them into imaginative creations to "pass the time and beautify their bleak surroundings" (Harisuna "The Art").

Delphine Harisuna's *The Art of Gaman* explores the various types of trench art that were often fabricated by interned Japanese Americans in their spare time. Unlike the art of their German counterparts, Japanese American art items did not contain cloaked gestures of contempt, but rather expressed their cultural backgrounds and customs. Using available materials such as wood and scrap metal, many Japanese Americans were able to create furniture, tools, toys, and other culturally significant items. Much like their military counterpart, Japanese American internment trench art reflected its creators' desires and cultural backgrounds. Items such as those presented in Appendix J were designed for use in everyday life like in Figure 34 while others such as in Figure 35 were made as a sign of gratitude towards others. Interestingly, some items such as the one shown in Figure 36 were even made for aiding in courtship. Regardless of what type of object the Japanese Americans crafted, many of them always included a distinct cultural appearance or function that differentiated them from other civilian and military trench art of the time.

## Section 2.3 POW Trench Art

It should be noted that bone and wood-based trench art was not limited to civilian internees as both POWs and active soldiers embraced the art whenever such materials were

available. Figure 37 in Appendix K presents a carved and painted ox bone made by a German POW. Unlike the German-made bone art pieces at Knockaloe Camp, which were often unpainted and depicted pastoral motifs, the POW bone art pieces were often decorated with “engraved and vividly painted military insignia” (Saunders 119). While smaller items such as bone art, woodcrafts, and even beadwork were common among POWs of all sides, on some rare occasions, we can find much larger, magnificent works of POW trench art. Saunders cites in one of his case studies of a particular trench art called the “Italian Chapel” on the island of Lambholm, Orkney, an archipelago in the Northern Isles of Scotland (Saunders 196). The chapel is the only remnant of Camp 60, a POW camp that housed Italian soldiers captured in North Africa during WWII.

According to Saunders, in late 1943, camp officials made available two Nissan huts<sup>6</sup> for the Italian POWs. One prisoner by the name of Domenico Chiocchetti began converting the huts into a chapel, with the assistance of other prisoners. Among them were “several electricians, a smith, and a cement worker” (Saunders 196). The author provides an extensive list of some of the features found on the finished Italian Chapel:

- An altar, moulded in concrete.
- Gold curtains, acquired from a company in Exeter, paid with money from the prisoner’s welfare fund.
- Candelabra<sup>7</sup> made from iron and brass.
- A tabernacle<sup>8</sup> made with wood obtained from a wrecked ship.
- Frescoes on the Chapel’s vault painted by Chiocchetti.

The Italian Chapel, which still stands today, is considered an impressive piece of trench art not

just for its sheer size, but also for the extensive amount of effort and detail taken to construct an authentic Italian chapel. From a material culture perspective, the Italian Chapel is an extremely significant example of both trench art and cultural recreation in a foreign land. For the Italian prisoners who built it, the Chapel served as a three-dimensional “expression of the prisoner-of-war experience for Italian men for whom their Catholic faith [...] sustained them during incarceration” (Saunders 197). This expression of sustainment was one primarily driven by defiance towards one’s captors, much like the case with German civilian internees at Knockaloe Camp.

Eileen Whitehead’s thesis, *World War II Prisoner of War Visual Art: Investigating its Significance in Contemporary Society*, argues that many POWs risked death to produce such works as the Chapel, which served as a “positive act of defiance, through which they managed to retain their sanity” (Whitehead 6). Whitehead cites from Ursano and Blundell that “defiance of oppression strengthens the will to live and provides personal empowerment” (Whitehead 6). In the case of the Italian POWs, she argues that the Italian Chapel, as a symbol of resistance, is key to maintaining the Italians’ “self-respect” in a situation of “enforced captivity” (Whitehead 6). It was through Saunderson’s case study of the Italian Chapel that inspired Whitehead with her work on POW paintings in the Pacific Theater. During WWII in the Pacific Theater, many American and Allied service members who were captured by the Imperial Japanese, were often subject to horrible mistreatment. In order to protest their abuse and confinement, many of these Allied POWs would paint the dehumanizing conditions of their captivity as a means of defying their Japanese captors. Please see Appendix K for pictures of the Italian Chapel.

### Section 3 – Recyclia and Memorabilia: Trench Art Beyond War

In the present day, we are left to assume that trench art is an aged fossil that shares a momentary

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<sup>6</sup> Prefabricated steel structure, made from half-cylindrical skin of corrugated steel for use as barracks.

<sup>7</sup> A large branched candlestick or holder for several candles or lamps.

<sup>8</sup> A large, locked box where the Eucharist is stored.



message at the time of its creation. However, if we look past that presumption, past the fog of war, we can see that trench art remains relevant, living beyond the battlefield as an influential artifact in the historical, artistic, and hobbyist field. At present, trench art is a rich and largely overlooked resource for gaining further cultural insight into the lives of the soldiers and civilians who created it. Trench art has inspired others to recreate it with both modern and period materiel. However, its uniqueness has resulted in conflicting views from museum institutions and private collectors. Additionally, trench art has also reinvigorated art movements, which seek to repurpose it to communicate relevant social issues in a polarized, geopolitical landscape.

As a culturally enriching resource, trench art presents a new dynamic in its artful representations of war. Traditional artwork such as paintings and memorials represent war from a “distance, spatially and temporally” (Saunders 163). As a result, such mediums usually fail at drawing its viewers closer to understanding the nature of conflict. These mediums ultimately become nonchalant impressions of warfare that lack “sensuous or tactile immediacy” (Saunders 163). Contrastingly, trench art aims to establish a more intimate relationship with its viewers through its incorporation of materiel into its artistic forms. Trench art possesses a “dimension of connectedness to people, war, loss, and survival”, something that is absent from conventional art mediums (Saunders 163).

### **Section 3.1 Recreating Trench Art**

The industrial nature of trench art, specifically through its incorporation of scrap metal, has inspired many artists to recreate that same style of artwork in their own time. This replication of trench art can sometimes utilize existing modern materiel or if possible, even period materiel, which further enhances the authenticity of a particular type of trench art. One instance of this inspired recreation comes from a set of 3D

sculptures made in the 1990s by a Belgian sculptor named Rik Ryan. Using WWI-era artillery shells collected from nearby battlefields, Ryan created two metal-based figurines depicting a wounded British and German soldier supporting each other. Both figures were on crutches, each with an amputated leg. Ryan’s penchant for making trench art figures was inspired by his earlier participation in WWI battlefield archeological digs. Spent munitions that had once maimed and “fragmented” the human body, were now being reassembled through trench art figurines to “make the body whole again” (Saunders 169).

Other contemporary artists such as Belgian artist Ivan Sinnaeve have begun making their own modern-day trench art. Sinnaeve, otherwise known as “Shrapnel Charlie”, began casting trench art-style WWI-era toy soldiers after being inspired by toy soldiers he had encountered in a local shop (Saunders 169). Rather than use commercial metal, Sinnaeve would use the “endless supply of lead shrapnel balls” scavenged from the battlefields by local farmers and children, to whom he would compensate with his finished figurines (Saunders 171). Much like Ryan, Sinnaeve shares fond memories of exploring old battlefields for war debris and other particularities.

### **Section 3.2 – Trench Art and Conflicting Attitudes**

Despite its ongoing recreation, trench art and its artistic value was often met with ambiguous responses by various academic and museum institutions in the postwar era. According to Saunders, there were conflicting attitudes towards trench art in its representation as war “souvenirs and memorabilia”, which ultimately elicited its popular description as being “kitsch” art or something of mere trivial value (Saunders 174). Saunders cites Susan Stewart’s book, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, where she states that the “kitsch object offers a saturation of materiality”

(Saunders 174). Stewart argues that the act of decorating a piece of military hardware such as a spent artillery shell would ultimately render it overmateralized and thus classify it as a kitsch item.

Contrastingly, some consider that the decoration of the artillery shell “personalizes” an otherwise “anonymous object by inscribing evidence of life, culture, and agency” (Saunders 174). The labeling of trench art as kitsch becomes quite detrimental to its cultural value, as it implies that one trivializes war, reducing it to something that is “commonplace” instead of something “awesome and frightening” (Saunders 174). Saunders believes that while there may be initial tension in accepting trench art as a culturally or artistically significant artifact, one could alternatively seek an anthropological understanding of a trench art item. He cites George Mosse’s summary of a 1916 German exhibition, organized by the Red Cross, called “Krieg, Volk, und Kunst” or War, Folk, and Art (Saunders 175). Mosse remarks how the Iron Cross, the highest German military decoration, would appear on everyday items from needle cushions to candy wrappers. After the Great War, many of these trivial items would be sold to tourists at historical battle sites as souvenirs.

Trench art would not become bound to anthropology. Much like any new idea or concept, trench art would eventually become an accepted facet of intellectual intrigue. Saunders states that the “attitudes toward trench art and its public display appear to be changing rapidly” (Saunders 182). He notes that various museums throughout the world, such as the *Histoire de la Grande Guerre* in France, have begun including a small number of trench art items for public display. Though, the items in questions are generally those that are more unique in appearance such as an “English Tommy’s helmet painted with a landscape scene” (Saunders 182). As more museums begin to organize these trench art items for public display, the museum institution may soon regard trench art as an artifact of great historical, cultural, and artistic significance.

### **Section 3.3 – Trench Art and Collectability**

Outside the realm of preservation, trench art still remains a popular item among some private collectors who seek it not so much for its monetary value, but for its sentimentality. Many collectors often establish emotional connectivity in these items. Perhaps they are like Ryan and Sinnaeve, looking to use trench art as an inspirational source for artistic expression. Others may collect for the aesthetic appeal while some may even have a personal obligation, possibly because an ancestor had once fought in a particular war and had made trench art during their service. Sometimes, historical re-enactors seek these items as a means to enhance their character’s personality during events. Today, many militaria websites, catalogues, and auction houses will sell different types of trench art to the various parties for the purposes above.

### **Section 3.4 – Repurposing Trench Art for Social Issues**

Trench art continues to expand beyond academia, preservation, recreation, and collection. In a polarized age of geopolitical agendas, warfare has become far more rampant, spreading like wildfire of varying sizes. These micro and macro conflicts concentrate themselves into the untamed, postcolonial reaches of the Third World, from the desert brush of Africa and the Middle East to the wet jungles of Southeast Asia. One such conflict was the Mozambican Civil War, which lasted from 1976 to 1992. This bitter conflict began two years after Mozambique had gained its independence from Portugal in 1974. In many ways, the Mozambican Civil War, like many other African civil wars during this time period, resembled the various proxy wars instigated by America and the Soviet Union in the heyday of the Cold War. Brutal violence would resurge as the Mozambican ruling party, Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), and its national armed forces, violently clashed with the Mozambique Resistance Movement (RENAMO).

The Mozambican Civil War was a complicated military situation, but can be simplified to an ideological struggle between two political groups. RENAMO, which was sponsored by a white-ruled Rhodesia, was founded in 1975 as part of an anti-Communist movement against Mozambique's more socialist, ruling party FRELIMO. After 16 years of fighting, the Mozambican Civil War would ultimately end in a stalemate following the deployment of United Nations peacekeepers and the commencement of multiparty elections in 1994. The conflict, though partially resolved, had scarred Mozambique, leaving behind a death toll that numbered in the millions, most of which were attributed to famine and war crimes committed by both sides.

Much like the Great War, the Mozambican Civil War would also see an influx in trench art, many of which have are still being presented in mobile exhibitions. Trench art would be revitalized for a new mission during this conflict, as it will with many others. Rather than simply serve as expressions of the individual, trench art would be repurposed to bring awareness about the bloody nature of the conflict. In addition, in the stead of the Mozambicans, trench art would help demonstrate the ability to build peace and heal a war-torn country after nearly 15 years of unrelenting armed conflict.

The transformation of trench art into a powerful social weapon for peace can be seen in Figure 41 (Saunders 207) of Appendix L<sup>9</sup>. This trench art sculpture, shaped as a bird, is comprised of various dismantled weapons that were traded in for tools as a means to help rebuild Mozambique<sup>10</sup>. The reinvigoration of trench art ultimately makes it a viable and flexible medium by which one can

communicate not just individual identity during war but also messages for social change.

## Conclusion

Trench art, the longstanding practice of transforming materiel into artwork, utilitarian items, and novelties has supplanted itself as a recurring movement in worldwide conflicts. Whether it is in the trenches of Western Europe, the jungles of Vietnam, or the desert brush of Mozambique, trench art seeks to express the desires of its creators, while codifying their cultural heritage and communicating their social messages. Trench art transcends the mere notion of a trivial item made to pass time. Rather, trench art serves as a dynamic element of material cultural studies that lends itself as a rich resource for understanding not just its materiality, but also its immateriality when glimpsing at the human side of war.

It has become increasingly imperative that we study, analyze, and interpret the messages behind these unconventional forms of art. The stressful and oftentimes traumatizing atmosphere of the battlefield drastically differs from the more comfortable mental environment of the civilized world. As such, a civilian on the home front and a soldier on the battlefield become isolated entities, separated by the sights, sounds, trauma, and desires each party encounters within their respective environment. For those residing in the theater of war, conventional methods of artistic expression such as painting are no longer deemed fully sufficient for communicating one's traumas and desires.

Instead, more rustic approaches à la trench art become the norm for soldiers seeking to cope with their experiences and convey their emotions to the outside world. Since these trench art pieces are often codified for a soldier's or war-exposed civilian's understanding, its meaning to us home front civilians is usually lost in translation. Henceforth, as these makeshift art pieces become collectables and museum exhibits, it has now

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<sup>9</sup> Appendix L also contains images of Ryan's 3D models and Sinnaeve working on his trench art tin soldiers.

<sup>10</sup> In 1995, the Mozambican government initiated a weapon trade-in program, where militants on both sides of the Civil War could turn in their weapons for tools, which could be used for rebuilding their war torn country.

become our mission to begin deciphering the hidden messages behind trench art. It has become our mission to bridge the gap of understanding between civilian and soldier, bringing us closer to understanding one's humanly desires, traumas, and experiences in warfare.



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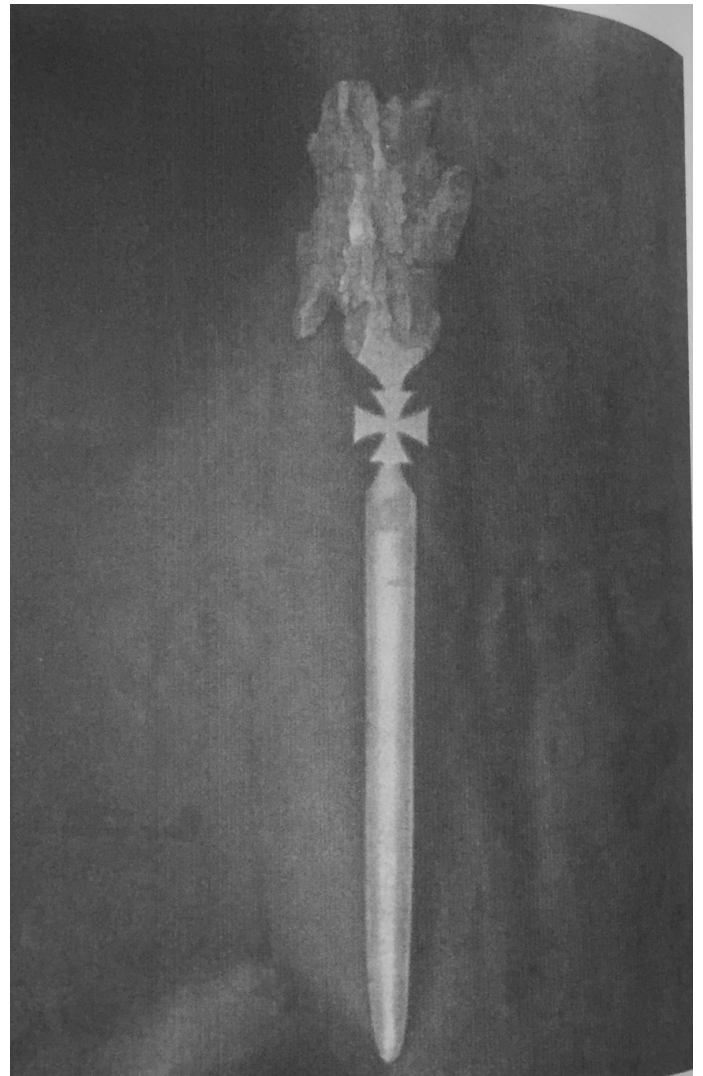
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## Appendix A – Stationary Trench Art

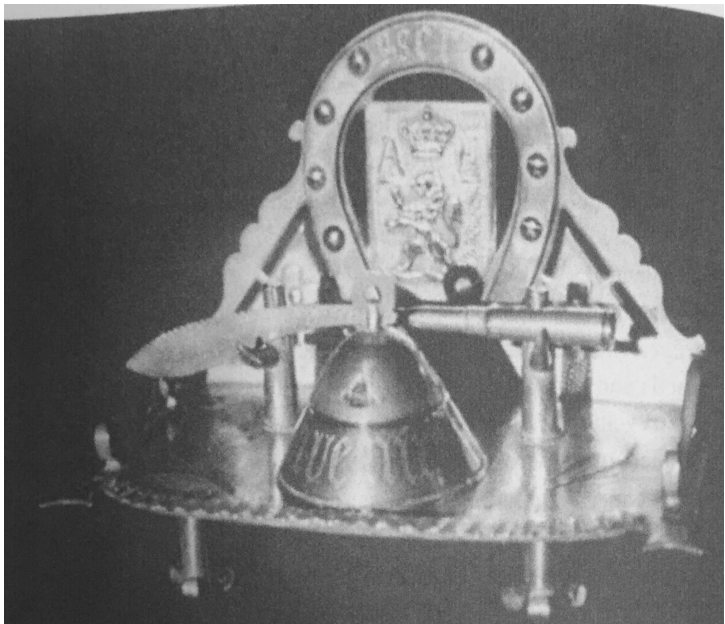


**Figure 1:** “*Crescent Blade Letter Opener*”: Several ornate WWI-era crescent-bladed letter openers made from brass scrap with bullets for handles. Note the King’s Crown on the leftmost letter opener, indicating that a British or Commonwealth soldier likely crafted the item.

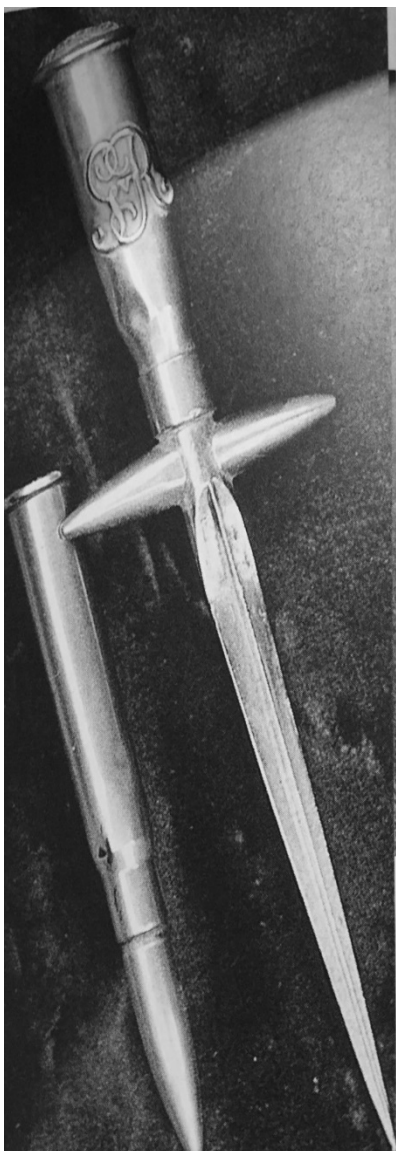


**Figure 2:** “*German Shrapnel Letter Opener*” – A WWI-era German-style letter opener with the handle fashioned from a piece of steel shrapnel. Note the German Iron Cross at the neck of the letter opener.





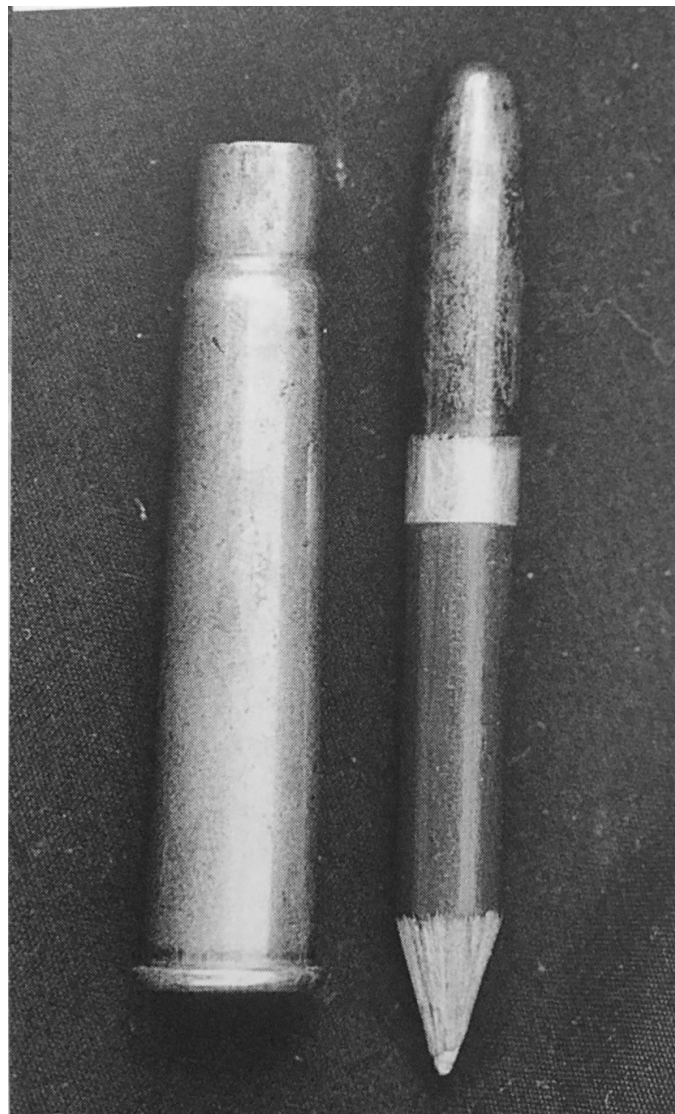
**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**

**Figure 3:** *“Belgian Writing Set”* – An ornate WWI-era writing set made from different types of materiel. The words “Yser” and “Souvenir” have been inscribed onto the writing set alongside a Flanders Lion engraving, indicating that the creator was likely a Belgian soldier.

**Figure 4:** *“Trench Dagger Letter Opener”* – A WWI-era letter opener doubling as a trench dagger. Made from a bayonet blade, a Belgian bullet handle, and a British .303 bullet cartridge as a sheath. The letter opener serves a dual purpose of being a stationery tool and a personal defense weapon.



**Figure 5**

**Figure 5:** *“Bullet Pencil”* – A WWI-era pencil that has been combined with parts of a bullet. The bottom half of the bullet casing acting as a protective cover for the pencil.



## Appendix B – Smoking Item Trench Art

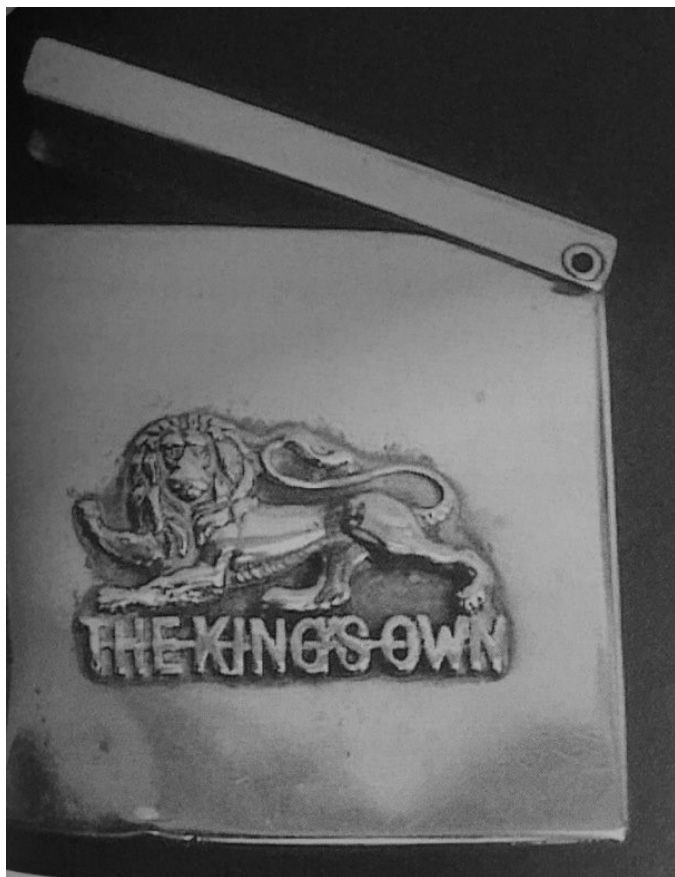


Figure 6

**Figure 6:** “*British Cigarette Case*” – A WWI-era cigarette cases made from scrap brass and emblazoned with the crest of The King’s Own Royal Regiment of Lancaster.



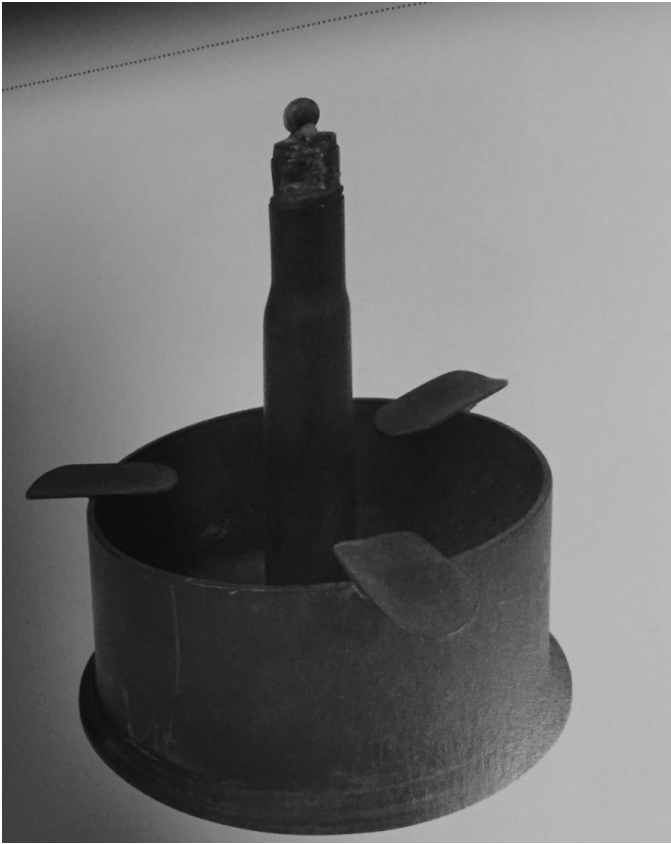
Figure 7

**Figure 7:** “*Ornate Smoking Pipe*” – An ornate WWI-era soldier’s smoking pipe made from a bullet cartridge stem and an aluminum bowel. The pipe has the engraving, “Iser.”



Figure 8

**Figure 8:** “*Souvenir Ash Tray*” – A post-WWI souvenir ashtray made from brass and decorated with bullets.



**Figure 9**

**Figure 9:** “*Ash Tray and Lighter*” – A WWII-era ashtray with an attached lighter, that appears to have been fashioned from a .50 caliber bullet.

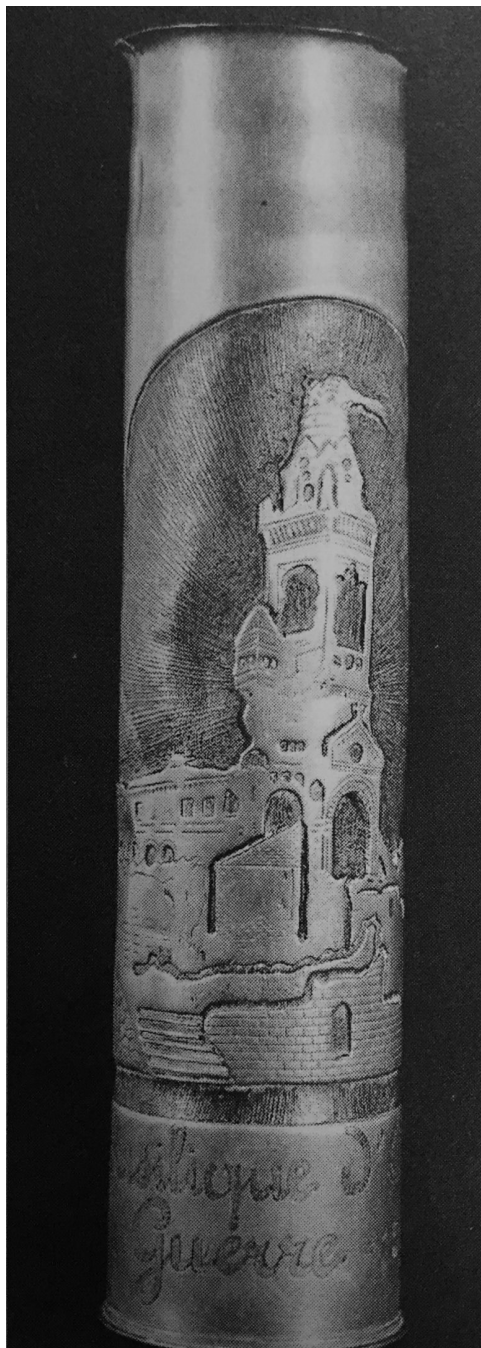
**Figure 10:** “*U.S. .50 Caliber Cigarette Lighter*” – A WWII-era cigarette lighter made from a .50 caliber bullet cartridge. The bullet itself has been hollowed out into a protective cap for the lighter.



**Figure 10**



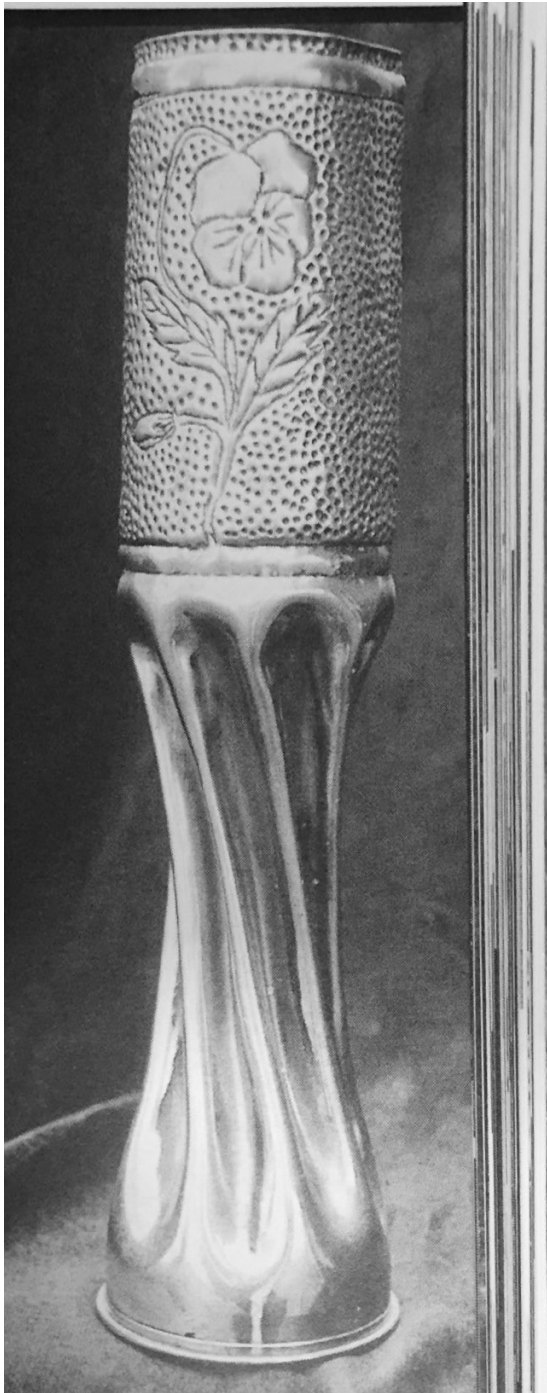
## Appendix C – Shell Art



**Figure 11:** “*Basilica at Albert*” – A WWI-era shell art dating back to 1916. This particular art piece is a 75mm French artillery shell and depicts the Basilica at Albert and its Madonna



**Figure 12:** “*Rudimentary Corsetted Artillery Shell*” – A WWI-era basic corsetted artillery shell art.



**Figure 13:** “*Corsetted and Twisted Artillery Shell*” – A WWI-era 75mm French artillery shell. The shell casing has been corsetted and twisted as well as engraved with a flower design.



**Figure 14:** – “*Art Nouveau Artillery Shell*” – A WWI-era shell art that has been extensively decorated with art nouveau pastoral motifs.





**Figure 15:** *“Alsace-Lorraine Artillery Shell”* – A pair of WWI-era German artillery shell art. Engraved on each shell is the cross of Alsace-Lorraine.

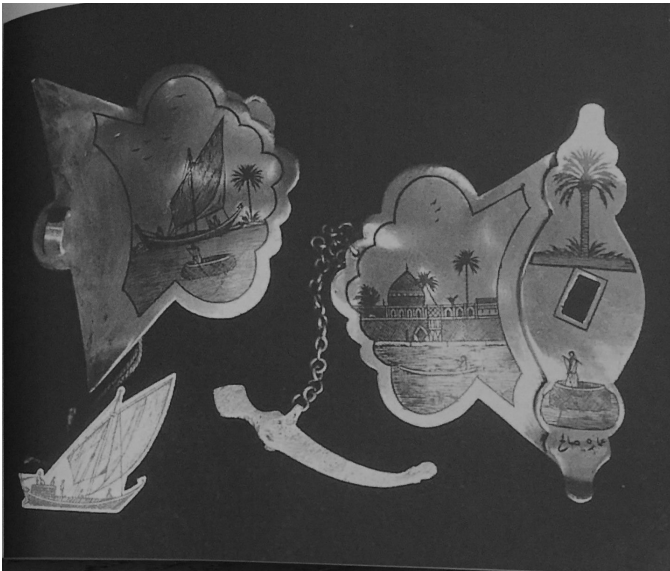


**Figure 16:** *“Flanders Lion Artillery Shell”* – A pair of WWI-era 77mm artillery shell cases that have been fashioned into vases. Each shell vase has an engraved Flanders Lion, the crest of Flanders.

## Appendix D – Jewelry Trench Art



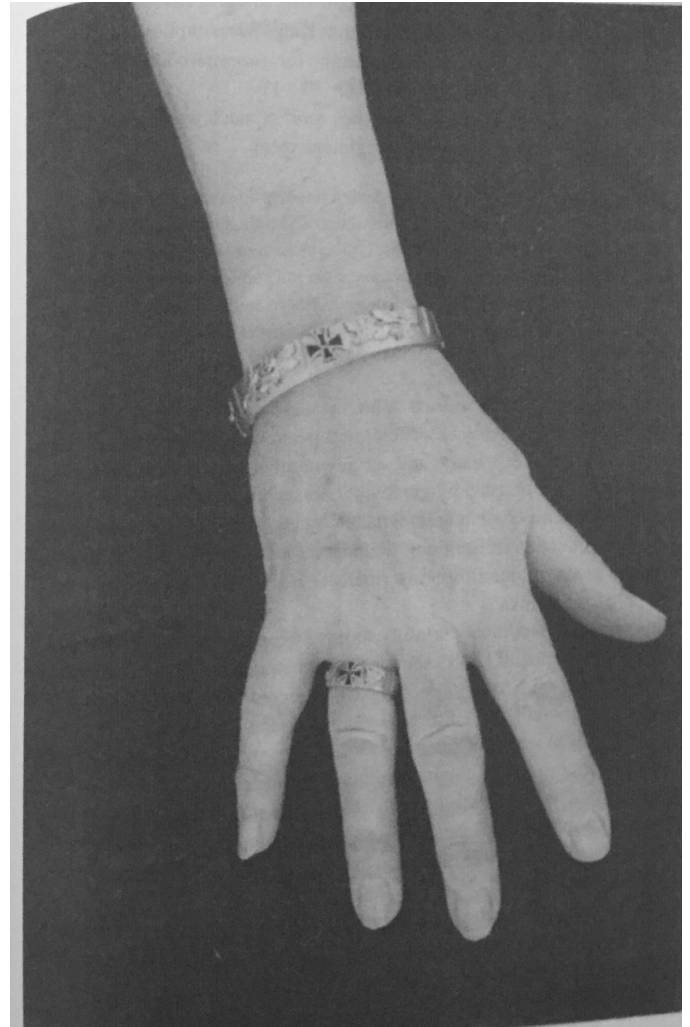
**Figure 17:** “*Souvenir Napkin Rings*” – Several post-WWI napkin rings made from aluminum and copper. The rings have the engraving “Ypres.”



**Figure 18:** “*Scrap Aluminum Jewelry*” – Assorted WWI-era trench art jewelry made from scrap aluminum. These pieces of jewelry were bought by British Staff Nurse M. G. Trembath to commemorate the Regatta of 1918 at Amarna, Mesopotamia. The Regatta are a series of boat races popular in different parts of the world, particularly in the UK.



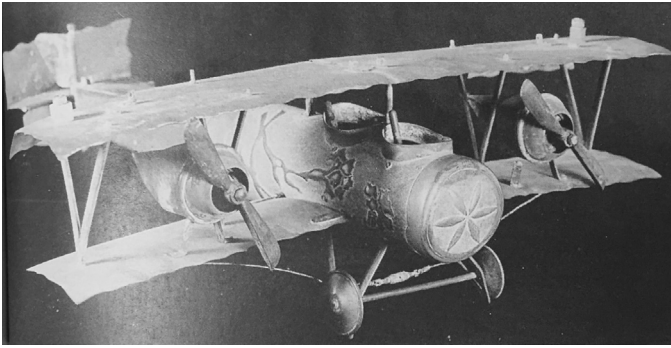
**Figure 19:** “*German Coin Bracelet*” – A WWI-era German-made bracelet consisting of Belgian 1 cent coins and German Iron Crosses labeled with the dates 1916, 1917, and 1918.



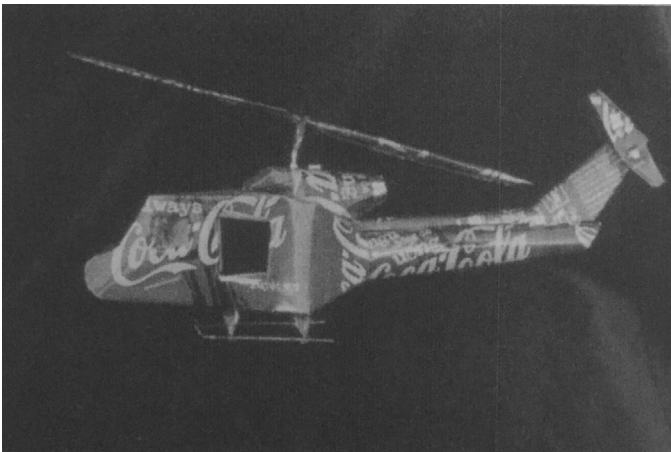
**Figure 20:** “*German Wrist Band and Finger Ring*” – A WWI-era commercially made German gold-plated wristband and finger ring. Both pieces are decorated with oak leaf clusters and miniature Iron Crosses.



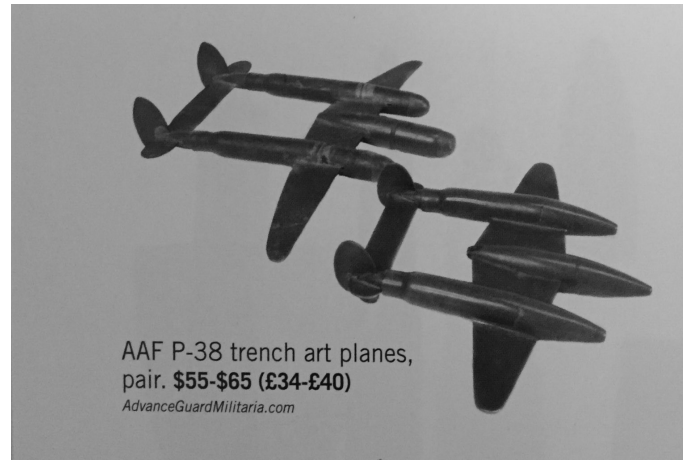
## Appendix E – Trench Art Models



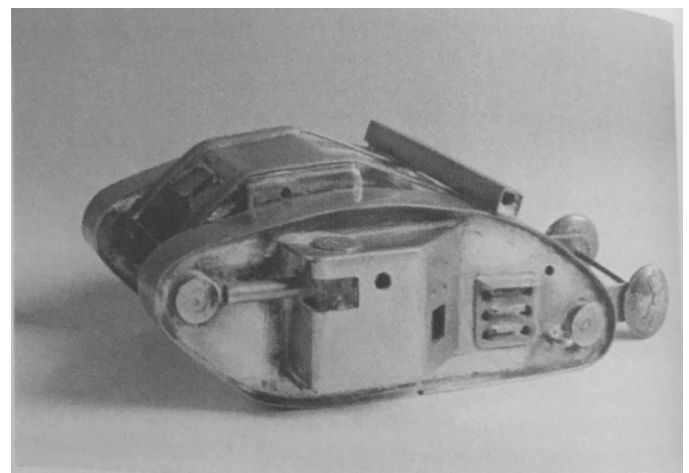
**Figure 21:** “*Trench Art Biplane*” – A large WWI-era trench art biplane. The propellers are made from wood and the fuselage is derived from a 75mm artillery shell case. The plane is 56 cm long with a maximum wingspan of 59 cm.



**Figure 22:** “*AAF P-38 Trench Art Planes*” – A pair of WWII-era trench art P38 Lightning heavy fighter planes. The planes appear to have been made from a mixture of brass, scrap metal, and bullet cartridges.

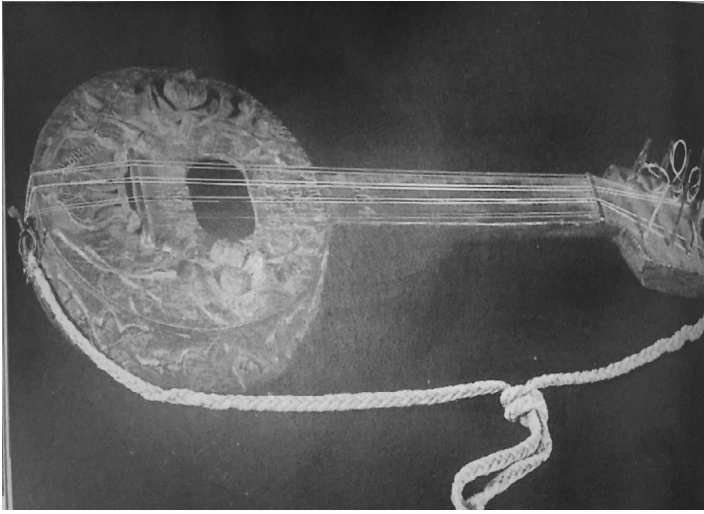


**Figure 23:** “*Trench Art Model Tank*” – A miniature WWI-era trench art model of a British Mark IV tank. The model is made from scrap brass and copper, decorated with uniform buttons. Though it is not visible, that author states that there is an inscription on the tank: “To Miss Marple from Private Shearer, Ypres 1917” (Saunders 98). The dimensions of the model are 6 cm x 19 cm x 11 cm. It is likely that the model was meant as a gift for a loved one, perhaps for a girl back at home.



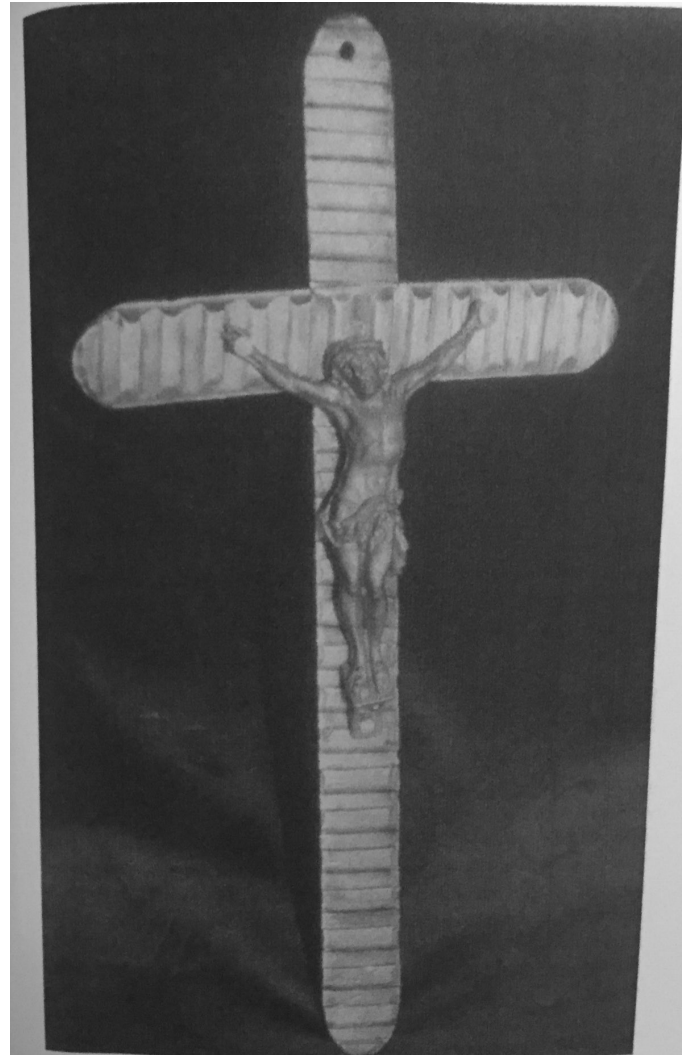
**Figure 24:** “*Coca-Cola Helicopter*” – A Vietnam War-era trench art UH-1 Huey helicopter gunship made from Vietnamese Coca-Cola cans.

## Appendix F – Trench Art Instruments



**Figure 25:** “*Trench Art Banjo*” – A WWI-era trench art banjo. Though difficult to spot, the author states that the banjo is inscribed with the following: “Souvenirs Des Campagnes 1914-1516” (Saunders 100). It is possible that a Harlem Hellfighter, an African-American from the all black 396th Infantry Regiment, made this banjo. Harlem Hellfighters were attached to French military units making the implementation of French language likely, based on their embedding with foreign units. Additionally, Banjos are heavily associated with the deep American south, in particular with African Americans and race tunes.

## Appendix G – Religious Trench Art



**Figure 26:** “*Trench Art Crucifix*” – A large WWI-era trench art crucifix made from the copper drive band of an artillery shell. The height of the crucifix is approximately 40 cm.



## Appendix H – Sweetheart Grips



**Figure 27:** “Vintage M1911A1 Sweetheart Grip” – A WWII issued M1911A1 .45 caliber handgun with custom sweetheart grips. This particular grip features a pinup photo of Ava Gardener.



**Figure 29:** “Nambu Type 14 Sweetheart Grip (Close Up)” – A much more closer view of Figure 28.



**Figure 28:** “Nambu Type 14 Sweetheart Grip” – A Captured WWII-production Japanese Nambu Type 14 8mm pistol fitted with sweetheart grips. The photo appears to be a picture of an American service member’s wife or loved one.

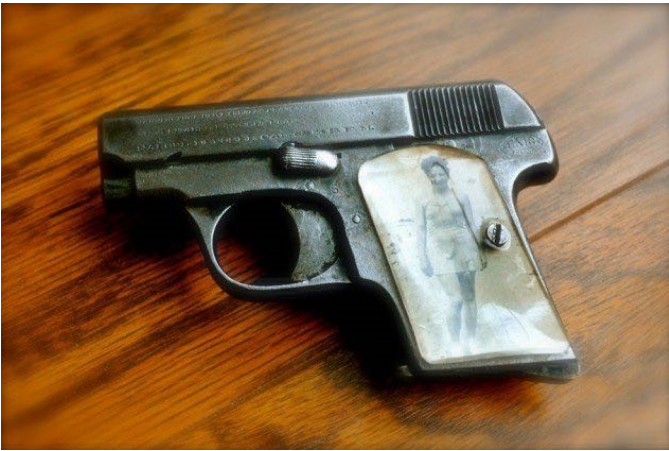


**Figure 30:** “GI with Sweetheart Grip 1911” – An WWII-era American service member posing with his custom M1911A1 handgun, fitted with sweetheart grips.

## Appendix I – Bone Trench Art



**Figure 31:** “*Couple’s Photo 1911*” – A WWII issued M1911A1 handgun fitted with custom sweetheart grips, featuring a photo of either a soldier or officer in dress uniform posing with a loved one.



**Figure 32:** “*Pocket Pistol Sweetheart Grip*” – A WWII-era French-made MAPF Unique mod 10 .25 caliber pocket pistol. The Unique was a slightly modified French copy of the American Colt 1908 Vest Pocket .25 caliber pocket pistol. The major difference between the two is that the French version sported a safety located just above the trigger whereas the American version had a safety located towards the rear, just underneath the slide. This particular pocket pistol features a sweetheart grip and was likely acquired by an American service member as a possible gift from a French resistance fighter, who would have typically carried such a pistol due to its concealability.



**Figure 33:** “*Internee Bone Trench Art*” – Several examples of WWI-era German internee bone trench art made at Knockaloe Camp, a British internment camp for German aliens.



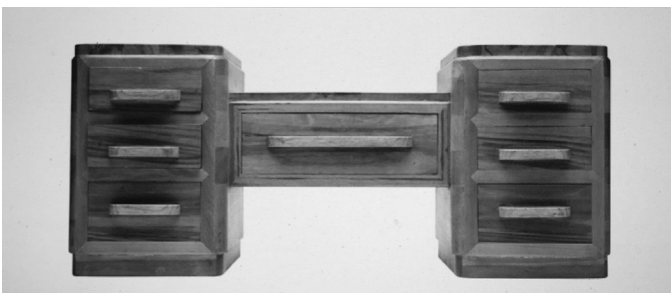
## Appendix J – Japanese Internment Trench Art



**Figure 34:** “*Tin Snips and Pliers*” – A plier (left) and tin snip (right) made from molten scrap metal by Akira Oye, a Japanese American interned at a camp in Rohwer, Arkansas. Tools such as these were often made melting down scrap metal in a boiler furnace and then hammering it out into a desired shape.



**Figure 35:** “*Palm Branch Table*” – A table made from scrap wood and palm tree branches by Mr. Tokieko while at the Fresno Assembly Center in Fresno, California. Mr. Tokieko made this table as a thank-you to his former neighbors, Effie and Emanuel Johnson of Compton, CA. The Johnsons had nursed Mr. Tokieko’s ill daughter Mary.



**Figure 36:** “*Japanese-Style Vanity*” – A Japanese style vanity made from persimmon wood. The creator, Pat Morihata of the Rohwer, Arkansas internment camp, was courting a woman he intended to marry with this vanity. Traditional Japanese vanities would often have a mirror and were situated in a very low position in keeping with the Japanese custom of sitting and kneeling. This particular vanity was made without nails and was held together through a process called dovetailing.

## Appendix K – POW Trench Art



**Figure 37:** “*POW Bone Trench Art*” – A WWI-era bone trench art made from an ox bone by a German POW, likely named Heniz Cremer. The emblem is probably an insigne of Cremer’s unit.

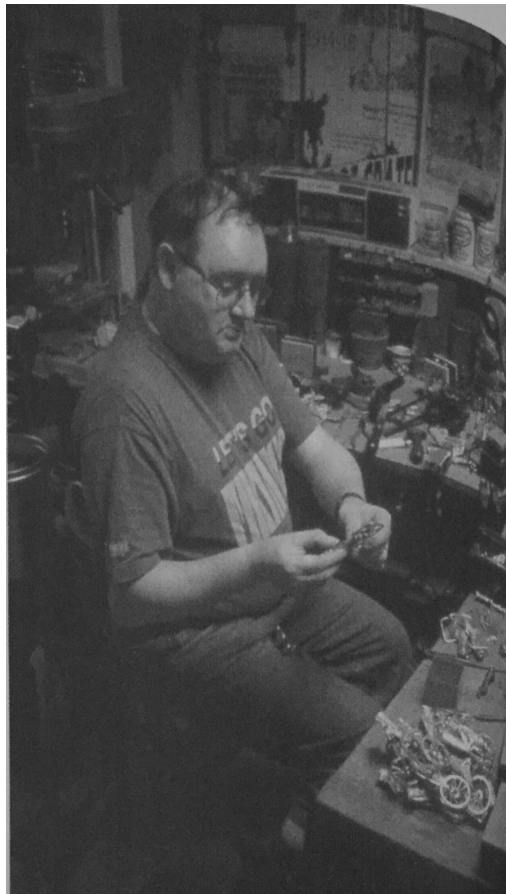


**Figure 38:** “*Italian Chapel*” – An interior shot of the Italian Chapel Trench Art Nissen Hut in the present day.



## Appendix L – Recreated and Repurposed Trench Art

**Figure 40 (Left):** “*Sinnaeve at Work*” – Belgian artist Ivan Sinnaeve in his workshop, making WWIstyle trench art miniature soldiers from lead and shrapnel balls.

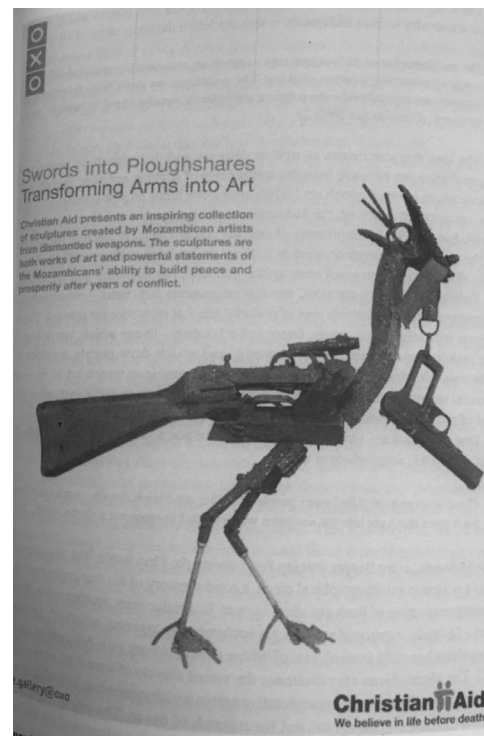


**Figure 40**



**Figure 39 (Above):** “*Trench Art Figurines*” – A pair of recreated WWI-style trench art figurines made from copper artillery drive-bands. The figures depict a wounded British and German soldier helping each other. The figures’ creator is Rik Ryon, a Belgian artist

**Figure 41 (Right):** “*The Bird that Wants to Survive*” – A leaflet publicizing the exhibition of Mozambique trench art entitled “Swords into Ploughshares at the Oxo Gallery London, January 2002. The featured sculpture, which was made by Fiel dos Santos, is entitled *The Bird that Wants to Survive*. The Bird is made from various weapons, most notably the buttstock of an H&K G3 battle rifle and either a Tokarev TT-33 or Norinco Type 54 handgun frame.



**Figure 41**