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Art forever changed by World War I

From the fiction of Hemingway to the savagely critical paintings of Otto Dix, WWI reshaped the notion of art, just as it forever altered the perception of war.

July 21, 2012 | By Reed Johnson, Los Angeles Times

Along with millions of idealistic young men who were cut to pieces by machine guns and obliterated by artillery shells, there was another major casualty of World War I: traditional ideas about Western art.

The Great War of 1914-18 tilted culture on its axis, particularly in Europe and the United States. Nearly 100 years later, that legacy is being wrestled with in film, visual art, music, television shows like the gauzily nostalgic PBS soaper "Downton Abbey" and plays including the Tony Award-winning "War Horse," concluding its run at the Ahmanson Theatre.

"It created an epoch in art," said Leo Braudy, a USC professor of English and author of "From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity." "The question is, what was on one side and what was on the other?"

The simple answer as to what lay on the near side of World War I is Modernism, that slippery but indispensable term denoting a wide range of new sensibilities and aesthetic responses to the industrial age. Modernism took shape decades before World War I, but its clamorous arrival was vastly accelerated by the greatest collective trauma in history to that point.

From the fiction of Hemingway, Virginia Woolf and John Dos Passos to the savagely critical paintings and etchings of George Grosz and Otto Dix, World War I reshaped the notion of what art is, just as it forever altered the perception of what war is. Although World War II racked up more catastrophic losses in blood and treasure, World War I remains the paradigmatic conflict of the modern age, not only politically but also culturally.

"Of all the wars, that is the one that seems to explain us best," said Michael Morpurgo, the English author of the novel "War Horse," about a Devonshire farm boy's death-defying bond with his noble steed Joey, on which the National Theatre of Great Britain's production is based.

Particularly in his country, he said, World War I resonates louder than the even greater cataclysm that followed it 20 years later. "The First World War for British people is very much a part of who we are," Morpurgo said during a visit to Los Angeles. "It's so deep in us; the poetry, the stories, the loss, the suffering is there in every village churchyard."

During and after World War I, flowery Victorian language was blown apart and replaced by more sinewy and R-rated prose styles. In visual art, Surrealists and Expressionists devised wobbly, chopped-up perspectives and nightmarish visions of fractured human bodies and splintered societies slouching toward moral chaos.

"The whole landscape of the Western Front became surrealistic before the term surrealism was invented by the soldier-poet Guillaume Apollinaire," Modris Eksteins wrote in "Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age."

Throughout Western art, the grim realities of industrial warfare led to a backlash against the propaganda and grandiose nationalism that had sparked the conflagration. Cynicism toward the ruling classes and disgust with war planners and profiteers led to demands for art forms that were honest and direct, less embroidered with rhetoric and euphemism.

"Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene besides the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates," Ernest Hemingway wrote in "A Farewell to Arms," his 1929 novel based on his experiences in the Italian campaign.

Other artists clung to the shards of classical culture as a buffer against nihilistic disillusionment. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins," T.S. Eliot wrote in "The Waste Land" (1922).

In "The Great War and Modern Memory," Paul Fussell argued that the rise of irony as a dominant mode of modern understanding "originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War."

Irony and dissonant humor permeated the music of classical composers such as Alban Berg and Benjamin Britten, a pacifist who parodied marching-band pomposity in his Piano Concerto in D. In his 1989 film "War Requiem," based on Britten's non-liturgical Mass, British director Derek Jarman suggested a parallel between the indifferent slaughter of World War I and the neglect of AIDS-infected young men in the 1980s.

The fear that powerful new machines invented to serve humanity might instead destroy it also took root around World War I, later spreading into science fiction and the debates surrounding today's aerial drone warfare. "World War I definitely gives a push forward to the idea of dystopia rather than utopia, to the idea that the world is going to get worse rather than better," Braudy said.

When war broke out in summer 1914, artists were among its biggest cheerleaders. Britain and France, Europe's dominant 19th-century military and cultural powers, saw the war as necessary for reinforcing the continental status quo, while Germany viewed it as an opportunity for "purging" Europe of political stagnancy and cultural malaise.

"War! We felt purified, liberated, we felt an enormous hope," Thomas Mann wrote in 1914. Only years later would the German author renounce his support of the war in his novels "The Magic Mountain" and "Dr. Faustus," which depicted wartime Europe gripped by a mass psychosis.

Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg initially drew analogies "between the German army's assault on decadent France and his own assault on decadent bourgeois values" and music, as the New Yorker music critic Alex Ross writes in "The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century." "Now comes the reckoning!" Schoenberg wrote to Alma Mahler. "Now we will throw these mediocre kitschmongers into slavery, and teach them to venerate the German spirit and to worship the German God."

For Morpurgo, the essence of how World War I stamped modern consciousness can be found in the works of a generation of English poets and writers such as Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon, all of whom served in uniform.

In the conflict's opening months, Brooke penned the wistfully patriotic "The Soldier," expressing hope that if he should die in combat he would be laid to rest in "some corner of a foreign field/ That is forever England." Three years later, Owen, who like Brooke would not survive the war, wrote with blunt fury about the horrors of gas attacks and the obscene futility of battle in "Dulce et Decorum Est."

The ruinous carnage of the War to End All Wars has come to be regarded as emblematic of all misguided military action and the societies that support it. George Bernard Shaw's 1920 play "Heartbreak House" and films such as Jean Renoir's classic "The Grand Illusion" (1937) and Peter Weir's "Gallipoli" (1981) dramatize the class-based interests and divisions that drove the war. Other movies such as Stanley Kubrick's "Paths of Glory," the peace-and-love hippie ethos of the 1966 "King of Hearts" and the grotesque music-hall choreography of the Vietnam-era "Oh, What a Lovely War!" (1969) underscore the notion that wartime signifies the taking over of the asylum by the lunatics.

But possibly the war's most enduring legacy, and one of its few positive ones, was to emphasize not the strategies of kaisers and field marshals but the personal stories of the nontitled individuals who actually fought and died in it.

The impulse to remember and honor the hardships endured by the ordinary foot soldier creates a direct link between Charles Sargeant Jagger's Royal Artillery Memorial at London's Hyde Park Corner, with its bronze figure of a dead soldier covered by a blanket, and Maya Lin's abstract, quietly dignified Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Amy Lyford, a professor of art history and visual arts at Occidental College, said that Surrealism developed partly from artists' desires to depict the massive traumas the war inflicted on individual human beings. Meanwhile, she said, the ruling classes after World War I were trying to "paper over" those wounds with plastic surgery, both literally in the case of mutilated veterans, who were fitted with newfangled prosthetics, and culturally.

"There was a kind of aestheticization of trauma," said Lyford, author of "Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France."

Today, Lyford said, some contemporary artists are exploring how "stories of reparation and therapy" are being used to paper over the actual and metaphorical wounds of 21st-century warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan. "The fragmentation is real," Lyford said. "It's not just something you sew up with stitches and move on."

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