

Art of the Holocaust

The first reactions through painting and sculpture to the Nazi persecution of Jews were produced soon after Adolf Hitler rose to power in the early 1930s. Artists continued to express their feelings about the Holocaust throughout the Holocaust period, and still do so today, more than 55 years after the fact. Holocaust art can be classified by the type of artist, whether camp inmate, survivor, liberator, or nonparticipant; the artist's goal in creating his work, ranging from eyewitness testimony to the memorializing of the victims or the condemnation of the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis; and the artist's style, such as realist, surrealist, abstract, or expressionist.

One of the most important types of Holocaust art is that which was created during the Holocaust itself by prisoners in the camps and ghettos. These artists risked their lives to produce art in the most insufferable of conditions. Some were forced by the Germans to create "official art." However, most ghetto and camp artists produced their art in secret, in defiance of the Nazis, in order to achieve two main goals. The first goal was to create an eyewitness report of the horrors going on all around them, in direct opposition to the Nazi desire to keep their murderous activities hidden from the rest of the world. The second was to resist the Nazis' systematic efforts to dehumanize the Jews: the prisoner artists struggled to maintain their sense of self through art in the face of Nazi dehumanization, and their art served to provide them with a reason to live.

The inmates who created art from within the confines of ghettos and camps almost always dealt with the Holocaust as a theme. After the war, some survivor-artists continued to depict their Holocaust experiences in art, either as a type of therapy or as a manifestation of their need to memorialize those who did not survive. Others, however, tried to put the past behind them and move on to different artistic subjects. Some of those survivors later returned to Holocaust topics in their work, sometimes as a result of events that reminded them of the past, such as the Eichmann Trial, the wars in Israel, or genocidal massacres similar to the Holocaust.

A different type of eyewitness also portrayed the Holocaust in art. This was the liberator, who came into the camps to free the surviving prisoners, and found an unimaginable state of being: huge piles of dead bodies, prisoners still alive but on the brink of death, filth and degradation. Some liberators artistically portrayed the camps in an objective manner, showing just what they saw with their own eyes. Others created art based on interviews with the surviving inmates, or based on their subjective feelings of revulsion and repulsion. Still others took photographs at the newly liberated camps. Their photos were published far and wide, in magazines and newsreels, allowing people in even the remotest areas to become eyewitnesses to the Holocaust.

Another type of artist to represent the Holocaust in his work is the Jewish artist who did not himself experience the Holocaust. Some of these artists had initially left all things Jewish behind, but in the wake of the Holocaust returned openly to Judaism and Jewish themes in their work, such as biblical motifs, scenes of the European *shtetl*, or the Jew at prayer. Others reclaimed their Jewish identity not by utilizing traditional Jewish motifs, but by dealing with the Holocaust in their art as an expression of their Judaism. This exhibits the growing phenomenon—not only among artists, but among many Jews—of the Holocaust as the defining aspect of their Jewish identity.

The children of Holocaust survivors constitute another group of artists who did not experience the Holocaust but are deeply affected by it. Some children of survivors use their art to try to put themselves in their parents' shoes and imagine how they would have reacted to life and death in the camps (see also *Survivors, Second Generation* of). Some young German artists have also started using their art to deal with and heal their country's painful past.

Common motifs, or themes, run through all categories of Holocaust art. The photographs taken by the liberators allowed the world to see, up close and personal, the decomposing piles of corpses lying around the camps and the sickly, starving survivors herded together behind ominous-looking barbed wire fences. Thus, these most commonly known Holocaust images of corpses, survivors, and barbed wire are used quite often throughout Holocaust-related art. These images are so often associated with the Holocaust that they are sometimes used to depict totally different subjects, which the artist means to

be understood through an analogy to the Holocaust. For instance, one Soviet Jewish artist used the image of barbed wire wrapped around a Soviet Jew to portray the idea that his imprisonment in Russia is like a Nazi concentration camp. Another potent symbol of the Holocaust is the crematorium chimney. This symbol is so well known that even when used alone in art, without the surrounding context of a crematorium or concentration camp, the noxious aura of the Holocaust is implicitly understood.

Another group of themes found in Holocaust art is employed in an attempt to deal with the moral questions associated with the subject. These themes are the victims, the perpetrators, and resistance to the Nazis. The victim is often portrayed through various biblical symbols, such as the sacrifice of Isaac, or as Job, who questions God in a world full of suffering. Sometimes the victims are even depicted as the crucified Jewish Jesus. Resistance to Nazism often employs biblical images, as well, such as David slaying a Nazi Goliath, or mythical images, such as Prometheus slaying the vulture. The portrayal of the Nazis is more difficult. On one hand, a realistic depiction can never effectively express their evil. On the other hand, a surrealist portrayal of the Nazis as monsters or demons does not do justice to the fact that those who carried out the Holocaust were human beings.