

To The Stars

Illuminating the art collection in 50 works

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.

Since the first recorded flight in 1903, humans have been fascinated by the possibility of taking to the skies, so it is no surprise that artists should be drawn to the subject matter.

With the outbreak of war in 1914, and again in 1939, sights were turned to the opportunity for attack and defense presented by air travel. Artists captured both the glory and destruction of this new era of flight, which can be seen throughout the exhibition.



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 6000 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 purchased for the nation to build up a lasting 'artistic record' of the war. However, some were used by the Government for propaganda, for example to encourage support from other nations. Exhibitions of the works were put on to keep up public morale and celebrate the war work of ordinary people.

Not all the artworks featured in To The Stars were produced as Official War Art. Thousands of professional and amateur artists also took inspiration from the strange new world in which they were living. Their work is also reflected in the exhibition.

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.

CRW Nevison

A Taube Pursued by Commander Samson

The Taube was a German aircraft known for being challenging to control and slow to turn, making it an easy target for the more advanced Allied aircraft of the First World War. Here the Taube appears bird-like, in contrast to the Commander Samson's mechanical fleet.



Paul Nash
Augsburg Raid

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.

Challenge: Think about the following questions to go even deeper. How does the artwork make you feel? What might the artist have been thinking/feeling when they made the artwork? How does this artwork compare to others around it in the exhibition?

Share and discuss ideas with partners or in groups.

Going to be Decorated: Bomber Command by Alfred Thomson

Alfred Thomson was an official War Artist to the RAF during the Second World War. Thomson was born in 1894 in India where his father worked for the British government. Thomson was deaf from birth. When the family returned to Britain from India he attended the Royal School for Deaf Children in Margate.

Thomson was mostly self-taught as an artist. Yet by the end of the First World War he had established himself as a professional artist.

Thomson completed a number of commissions for the WAAC during the Second World War and in September 1942 became a full-time salaried artist for the Air Ministry. Thomson painted several portraits of RAF air crews during his career, including this one.



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 Alfred Thomson might have painted this artwork.

(To commemorate/remember a moment of joy and celebration amongst friends in the RAF during wartime.)

Discuss whether you think this type of scene would have been common during the Second World War.

Encourage students to think about the quote by Menna Waldon Jones below. Although it is in reference to a different painting (Take Off by Laura Knight) it helps to explain that the serious work of Bomber Command sometimes be balanced with moments of light humour in order to keep up morale.

“Laura Knight could see more than a few lads joking and apparently making light of a hazardous enterprise. She could see beyond their exteriors.”

Flight Officer Menna Waldon Jones,
1943

AC 1 Aircraftman, 1st Class, JDS Gordonu, RAF Halton by Alfred Thomson



Much of JDS. Gordonu's story remains a mystery as his records are not yet publicly available. We do know, however, that he worked as an Aircraftman within the RAF, and was attached to an RAF Balloon Command unit in 1941.

During this time he featured in 'This is a Barrage Balloon', a film by The Colonial Film Unit. Films made by this organisation were shown in the British colonies of the time including British Guiana and Nigeria, with the aim of encouraging citizens to join the war effort to defend the 'mother country'. Gordonu was himself from Nigeria, and became one of 600,000 African servicemen who supported the Allies in the Second World War.

Gordonu's portrait was painted during his time at RAF Halton, but the reason for his presence there is unclear. In 1943 Alfred Thomson visited RAF Halton to paint servicemen undergoing medical treatment and convalescing. Perhaps Gordonu was one such patient.

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.

1. Describe what you can see
2. Go a bit deeper
3. Put these ideas together.

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.

- JDS Gordonu is very smartly dressed in this portrait, but he is not wearing any badges to suggest that he is a member of aircrew. What role might he have had within the RAF?
- The expression on JDS Gordonu's face looks very thoughtful, what might he be considering?

Around the Museum

1. Try out the 'Follow My Lead: Diversity in the RAF' trail to find out more about the inspirational stories of ethnically diverse people involved with the Royal Air Force. This can be found here: [Follow my lead: Diversity in the RAF | Royal AirForce museum - Mobile Guide \(rafm.guide\)](#)

Follow up Activity

1. Draw or paint a portrait of someone you know well. Try to focus on their facial expressions to tell the viewer something about their mood.

Section Officer Austen: WAAF Meteorologist by Evelyn Dunbar

Evelyn Dunbar was the only female full-time Official War Artist hired by the WAAC during the Second World War. Perhaps due to her own place as a female artist in a male-dominated environment, Dunbar mostly focussed on painting women in wartime.

After meeting Royal Auxiliary Air Force (RAAF) volunteer Roger Folley in 1940, she began accompanying him to his postings at RAF bases all over the UK. Whilst at RAF Gravesend, Dunbar painted Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) meteorologist Austen. In Met Offices WAAFs usually observed and recorded weather patterns while senior male officers forecasted conditions. Austen broke this tradition. As the station's senior Met officer, she oversaw forecasts and was able to influence strategy planning. In this painting she is seen plotting weather on to a map.

In the Exhibition

Class exercise

Follow the three steps to studying an artwork:

1. Describe what you can see
2. Go a bit deeper
3. Put these ideas together.

Find the other artworks showing people contributing to the war effort (outside of piloting a plane). 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.

(This subject matter was usually more accessible than creating artwork focussed on the work of pilots, or battles during the war, particularly for artists who weren't commissioned by WAAC. May also have been a way to celebrate the efforts of everyday people.)



Section Officer Austen: WAAF Meteorologist

by Evelyn Dunbar



Around the Museum

1. Around the Museum there is lots of information about the role of women in the RAF from its creation in 1918 to the present day. See how many objects, uniforms and stories you can find in Hangers 1 and 2.

Women's Auxiliary Air Force uniform from around 1940. You can find this uniform in **Hangar 1**, along with a head and breast set used by plotters to receive and reply to instructions.

Follow up Activity

1. Draw a basic map of your local area (or use a printed one).
2. Go outside and observe the weather. Make a note of the conditions. Think about the type of weather (rain, snow, hail, sun, etc). Is it foggy? Is it cloudy? Is it windy? Is it stormy? Try to think about the types of information a pilot would need for a safe and successful flight.
3. Go back inside and create a symbol for each piece of weather information, for example you could draw droplets if it is raining.
4. Plot your weather symbols on to your map. Be as detailed as possible as pilots need lots of precise information.

Crucifixion by Gladys Hynes



Gladys Hynes painted 'Crucifixion' in 1939 as one of several artistic statements against Britain's declaration of war on Germany.

By the mid-1930s, a time of great unrest and uncertainty, many British artists joined pacifist causes. Their views can be clearly seen in their art from this period, which sits in contrast to the work produced by Official War Artists belonging to WAAC.

Some, like Hynes, protested against the war based on their religious beliefs, as well as their political views. This is reflected in the Christian imagery of 'Crucifixion', which is made surreal by the exchange of a crucifix for an aircraft.

For Hynes, 'Crucifixion' symbolised more than a protest against war and the sacrifice of young airmen. Hynes' younger brother had died six days after receiving his pilot's licence during the First World War in 1916. This painting can be seen as a fitting memorial to him.

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.

1. Describe what you can see
2. Go a bit deeper
3. Put these ideas together.

Encourage your group to consider ideas about sacrifice and duty during times of war.

Challenge: Compare 'Crucifixion' to pieces of art created by Official War Artists in the exhibition such as 'Fighter Affiliation: Halifax and Hurricane' by Walter Thomas Monnington. What are the differences in how war is presented? Why might this be?

Around the Museum

1. One of the inspirations behind this painting was the death of Hynes' brother in the First World War. If you would like to find out more about the role of the RAF in the First World War, there are lots of exhibits including aircraft, objects and stories in Hangar 2.

Follow up Activity

1. Draw, paint or sculpt a self-portrait. It should tell the person looking at it something about you. This could be a favourite hobby or subject at school, or something you really care about, such as protecting the environment.