

Topic Area: Art Created in Labour Camps and Ghettos

Key enquiry questions and learning from topic study.

- What kinds of art was created in labour camps and ghettos during the Holocaust, by whom and for what purpose?
- What can art created by victims and survivors of the Holocaust tell us about their experiences?
- How we understand art created during the Holocaust as a kind of “visual memoir” (Stephen Feinstein)

Studying the art created by those who suffered in the events of the Holocaust deepens a sense of empathy for those who struggled but remained resilient despite the inhumane treatment to which they were subjected. It also provides an important reminder that those who lost their lives and suffered in the Holocaust are not a number, but real people who channelled their thoughts and experiences through works of art. Art could be a form of spiritual resistance for some, a kind of continuity of “normal” life for others, or a way of expressing despair. Engaging in artistic practice was even a way of accessing safer working environments in camps.

Historical Background

German authorities began segregating Polish Jews in ghettos or confined areas in 1939. These ghettos were initially used by the German authorities to distinguish between the Jewish and non-Jewish populations; however, they were later used as grounds for executing European Jews. The Jewish people who were segregated into these ghettos and zones underwent harsh living conditions: cramped, unsanitary, under threat of deportation, round-ups (for forced labour), random violence and reprisal actions, and later deportation (particularly from March 1942, and the start of Operation Reinhardt). Nonetheless, Jewish people continued to express themselves through song, verse, and poetry. Here we present just a few examples.



Mordechai Gebirtig,
Public domain, via
Wikimedia Commons

The Yiddish poem ‘Es Brent’ (It’s Burning) by Mordecai Gebirtig written in 1936 in retaliation to a pogrom in Przytyk (Poland) became an anthem of

the underground resistance in the Kraków ghetto. Gebirtig was initially expelled from Kraków, but then later sent to the Kraków ghetto in March 1942. He was killed there during a major 'action' on 4 June 1942. [Link to poem](#)

In the Warsaw ghetto, writer, poet, and teacher Itzhak Katzenelson wrote poems, plays, and essays. He focused on themes of the experiences in ghettos, labour camps, and Jewish history. In 1943, Katzenelson was deported to France, the Vittel camp, where he wrote the poem 'Song of the Murdered Jewish People'. In 1944 he was deported to the Auschwitz camp where he was murdered. [Link to poem/ book](#)

Art in Labour and Internment Camps

It is important to differentiate between art commissioned by the Nazis, 'unofficial' art created for Nazi guards in exchange for food to survive, and secretly created art, as a form of self-expression by prisoners, or as an act of resistance, documenting the crimes they witnessed. Common themes and imagery in painting and drawings produced secretly in labour camps are barbed wire fences, cramped environments, food, lack of sanitation, communal areas, and loneliness. They can be viewed as documentation of the lives the Jewish people led in the camps. The symbolism of barbed wire fences and cramped conditions in the artworks represent the isolation from the rest of society and the loneliness they felt while living in these conditions.

Many of the pieces of art created in camps, or after release or escape from camps, depict people completing everyday tasks, such as washing their hair, bathing, eating food, and cleaning. However, beneath the surface of the drawings and paintings, the reality of the artists' situation reveals how hard it was to complete such simple tasks – the Jewish people tried desperately to recreate the normality of their lives before the Holocaust but were met with continuous obstacles and inhumane treatment.

One important example is the work of the artist Felix Nussbaum, who was born in Germany in 1904 and fled to Belgium, after the Nazis came to power. In 1940, he was sent to Saint Cyprien internment camp and – after his escape from the camp – produced a number of drawings and paintings depicting his impressions. Living in hiding following his escape, Nussbaum was caught and deported to Auschwitz in 1944, where he died.

[Link to Nussbaum's artwork](#)

[Link to further information about Saint Cyprien and more examples of Nussbaum's work](#)

Further Examples of Artworks Suitable for the Classroom

1. 'Portrait of a Woman among Sunflowers' by Amalie Seckbach. Created in 1944 during Seckbach's imprisonment in Terezín ghetto. She used watercolour tools, pastels, and drawing paper to create this. Image in public domain. [Link to image](#)



2. Another portrait painted by Amalie Seckbach during her time in Terezín in 1943. She used coloured pencils and drawing paper. Image in public domain. [Link to image](#)

Terezín was a unique site in the history of the Holocaust. Terezín functioned in part as a 'model ghetto', designed to convince the world, and particularly the Red Cross who made an inspection visit to the site, that inmates were living out their lives in relative comfort. This was a façade; conditions in Terezín were miserable. Of the roughly 155,000 people who passed through Terezín, approximately 35,000 died of disease or starvation and 87,000 were deported to killing sites elsewhere in Europe. However, the prisoners did have relative amount of freedom, including to produce art.

3. 'Three Women Inmates Sitting beside a Fence in the Gurs Camp' by Lou Albert-Lazard painted in 1940. [Link to image](#)

Albert-Lazard used watercolours to create this drawing. She created drawings and paintings of scenes in the Gurs camp of women. She asked women to model for her artworks and captured their everyday lives and living conditions in her drawings. Notably, this painting depicts a barbed wire fence – a symbol of the isolation and brutal nature of the labour camps.

Summary of Key Concepts

- Many Jewish people created art that documents their experiences in labour and internment camps. Studying this art is important as it offers insight into everyday experiences and emotions, the humanity of those producing the work, and the role that art could play in survival.
- Following the German authorities segregating Poland and creating ghettos, Jewish people continued to use song and verse to express themselves.
- Many people who were imprisoned in labour and internment camps during the Holocaust were able to create pieces of artwork, either secretly or in exchange for food to get by in the camps. They were able to use watercolours, pastels, and drawing papers to create portraits and capture the everyday lives of the internees.
- The artworks created by Jewish prisoners often contained imagery of cramped environments, lack of privacy, lack of sanitation, barbed wire fences, search for food, dark colours, and communal life.
- Many Jewish people in labour camps desperately tried to emulate normality during their imprisonment (e.g., cleaning, washing, dressing), their artworks show the obstacles they faced while doing basic tasks due to the lack of privacy and sanitation in the labour camps.

Key Resources for Teacher Subject Knowledge Development

- Ewa Stańczyk, '[Surviving Art from Terezín: The Satirical Drawings of Pavel Fanti](#)', 2022, Vol. 36 (1), p. 3–18. A journal article that examines surviving art from a Jewish inmate at Terezín. The article focuses on themes of satire and humour that are featured in the artworks. There is also an option to listen to the article.
- Pnina Rosenberg, '[Art During the Holocaust](#)', *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*. This article is recommended for both teachers and students as it offers accessible but detailed information on the everyday and personal lives of inmates at labour camps. It particularly focuses on the different experiences Jewish people had based on gender. It offers insight into the different artistic expressions of male and female artists.

Existing Resources for the Classroom

- [Holocaust Education Trust, *Art and the Holocaust: A Teacher's Guide*](#)
An essential resource for teachers who would like to use art in their practice, including discussion of key principles, historical context, key examples and art produced by children. It also offers some ideas for lesson plans including art.
- [Yad Vashem, *Teaching Liberation through Art*](#) Provides a lesson plan and further examples of artists and artworks created during the Holocaust or in response to liberation. Further examples are provided in Yad Vashem's online exhibitions 'The Anguish of Liberation as Reflected in Art, 1945-1947' and 'Art from the Holocaust'. The Yad Vashem exhibition also has information on the tools used to create the pieces shown.
- [BBC Culture, 'Art From the Holocaust: The Stories Behind the Images'](#) A BBC article that shows the artwork shown in an exhibit in Berlin. The article offers descriptions and analyses of the paintings shown. Notably, it also offers background information on the artists themselves.
- [Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, 'Works of Art'](#) Information on the collection of surviving artworks associated with the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, divided into four key groups: 1) works made secretly in concealment from the SS; 2) sketches and small objects made for private use by prisoners; 3) works made by prisoner artists for the Lagermuseum that the Germans set up; 4) works made after the war.

