

Artistic Responses to the First World War

Unit one – 4 lessons designed for Key Stage 3 (year 9) and above
Suitable for English Literature, History and Citizenship

The purpose of this unit is to explore some creative responses to the First World War by the men and women of the Jewish community at the time and the impact that the war and their 'Jewishness' had on them as artists.

The resources include two essays and profiles of eight influential Jewish artists from the period, written and curated by the Ben Uri Art Gallery and Museum: including an examination of their work and the important role that the Whitechapel Art Gallery played in their lives. The artists profiled are David Bomberg, Jacob Epstein, Mark Gertler, Jacob Kramer, Bernard Meninsky, Isaac Rosenberg, Clare Winsten and Alfred A Wolmark.

Case studies focus on poets Isaac Rosenberg and Siegfried Sassoon and explore their poetic responses to the war with reference to some of the other war poets of the period.

All the artists and poets selected for this unit had their work published. There may be many more artists and artistic responses from the Jewish community that are awaiting exposure and we hope that the We Were There Too project might bring them to light.

There are four lessons in the unit which work together. However, each of the individual lessons could be used as a single lesson or split into two lessons.

Aim of the resources:

- To introduce Jewish artists from the early twentieth century
- To explore how someone's ethnicity influences their creative output
- To explore how the Jewish East End created/influenced the Whitechapel set
- To discuss why war needs or provokes an artistic response
- To discuss how poetry of the First World War has influenced later generations' understanding of the war
- To reflect on how war is presented through the arts
- To reflect on how poetry and art has a lasting legacy for Remembrance

Lesson 1: The Whitechapel Artists

Resources:

Case studies on:

- [The Jewish community in 1914](#)
 - [Evelina Hospital for Sick Children](#)
 - History window – [Jewish Artists and the First World War](#) – also contains artist profiles for David Bomberg (edited for unit 1 version), Jacob Epstein (more suitable for older groups or higher ability groups), Mark Gertler, Jacob Kramer, Bernard Meninsky (edited for unit 1 version, more suitable for older groups or higher ability groups), Isaac Rosenberg, Clare Winsten and Alfred A Wolmark
 - [The Whitechapel Gallery article](#)
 - [The map](#)
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Lesson outcomes:

Pupils will:

- Know about some of the Jewish artists who emerged from the East End of London
- Understand the background of the Whitechapel artists
- Appreciate some of the ways in which their 'Jewishness' influenced their art
- Reflect on why the East End of London was associated with Jewish creative output

Enquiry question and leading questions:

What does the East End of London have to do with Jewish artists?

- Why were Jewish people living around the East End of London?
 - What factors made the Jewish artists of the East End group together?
 - What influence did their being Jewish have on some of them as artists?
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Activities

Teacher: Introduce the pupils to the East of London at the turn of the century, use the resources [The Jewish community in 1914 – historical information](#) and [the map](#) to help you.

Stage 1

Working in small groups, distribute the information on:

David Bomberg, Mark Gertler, Isaac Rosenberg (artist), Alfred A Wolmark and Clare Winsten

Ask the pupils to describe and list the following information on their own sheet:

- Where the person was born?
- When they lived in East London?
- Why they lived in East London?
- What type of artist were they?
- Did they go to art school?
- What did their parents do?
- Did they have brothers and sisters?
- Did they marry?
- Did their 'Jewishness' feature in any of the art work included in the case study?

Stage 2

Still in small groups, ask the pupils to write down their answers to the questions included in the case study.

Stage 3

Ask the different groups to present their findings on the different artists to the class. They need to say what they think are the key links that each person has to the East End and to Whitechapel.

Conclusions

Ask the pupils to each create a grid listing the five artists that have been studied – collating some of the information. e.g:

Artist	Born and died	Grew up in London	Famous picture titles	Picture with a Jewish theme	Connection to Whitechapel	Outstanding fact about this person

Follow up

Find out about the different occupations of many of the Jewish immigrants in the East End of London?

Advanced pupils could do the same work in pairs or on their own, they could also include Meninsky, Kramer and Epstein in the study.

Lesson 2: Art & War

Resources:

Case studies on:

- [The Jewish community in 1914](#)
 - [Evelina Hospital for Sick Children](#)
 - History window – [Jewish Artists and the First World War](#) – also contains artist profiles for David Bomberg (edited for unit 1 version), Jacob Epstein (more suitable for older groups or higher ability groups), Mark Gertler, Jacob Kramer, Bernard Meninsky (edited for unit 1 version, more suitable for older groups or higher ability groups), Isaac Rosenberg, Clare Winsten and Alfred A Wolmark
 - [The Whitechapel Gallery article](#)
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Lesson outcomes:

Pupils will:

- Know about the involvement of some Jewish artists in the First World War
- Understand how their experiences of the war affected their lives
- Reflect on how some of them used their experiences in their work

Enquiry question and leading questions:

How did the First World War affect the life of artists?

- How is war presented in art?
 - Did the war affect the artistic style of the Jewish artists?
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Activities:

Teacher

Using the historical information, introduce the First World War to the pupils.

Explain that the war required millions of volunteers and that everyone, regardless of their peacetime occupation, was required to contribute to the war effort in some way.

Stage 1

Working in small groups, distribute the case studies of all 8 artists amongst the groups (some groups might have two artists depending on ability).

Ask them to answer the following questions:

- Date of Birth and location of birth
- Where their parents were from?
- Where they grew up?

- Did the artists have other occupations?
- What did they do during the war?
- Is there any indication of how their being Jewish affected their lives?
- Did they serve in the military?
- Did they survive the war?
- Is there any reference to the war in the art they produced?
- If they survived the war did they carry on being an artist?
- What are their key pieces of art?

Stage 2

Teacher: David Bomberg and Bernard Meninsky both acted as war artists producing paintings for the authorities. Ask the pupils why this was something that people asked for?

Ask the pupils to identify which of the pictures included in the case studies are a response to war – what messages do they think are conveyed in the pictures – do they make war look exciting?

Ask the pupils what Clare Winsten may have been involved with as a pacifist?

Stage 3

Teacher – provide pupils working in pairs or small groups with two different artists. Ask the pupils to compare the two artist's lives, identifying similarities, differences and what impact their different war experiences had on them.

Ask them to assess if, in their opinion, the war affected their lives as artists and what that affect was?

Conclusions

Present their findings to the class

As a class, create a chart that records what the pupils think is the most important effect that the war had on each of the artists and whether it did or did not seem to shape the rest of their life or career.

Follow up

Create a gallery from the art work in the case studies that tells the lives of the artists and their war experiences.

Lesson 3: War Poetry

Resources:

- History Window – [The War Poets: Isaac Rosenberg](#)
- History Window – [The War Poets: Siegfried Sassoon](#)
- History Window – [Poetry and the First World War](#)
- Poems resource

Lesson outcomes:

Pupils will:

- Know about the involvement of some Jewish artists in the First World War
- Understand how their experiences of the war affected their lives
- Reflect on how some of them used their experiences in their work

Enquiry Question and leading questions

How did the First World War affect the life of artists?

- How is war presented in art?
- Did the war affect the artistic style of the Jewish artists?

Activities:

Teacher

Teacher – from the History Window on Poetry and the First World War, explain why poetry was popular at the start of the twentieth century.

Stage 1

Provide pupils working in pairs with either the case study on Isaac Rosenberg or the one on Siegfried Sassoon.

Ask them to write their answers to the following:

- Where did the poet grow up?
- What was his family background?
- Was he rich or poor?
- How important was his Jewish heritage?
- What did he do before the war?
- What was his role during the war?

When the pupils have completed the task, they should work with another pair that had the other poet to create a group chart of their findings and compare the two poets. Identify other key similarities or differences between the men. e.g:

Question or theme	Rosenberg	Sassoon
Is he rich or poor?		

Stage 2

Provide each pupil with a poem from the Poem resource and ask them to create a spider gram about what the lines tell them about the events of war

What further information do they need for the poem to convey a full picture of the conflict?

Ask the pupils to write down how the poem they are looking at tells them about the past?

Stage 3

Most of the war poets are from middle class families and are well educated. Isaac Rosenberg was different as he came from a poor immigrant background. Critics have said that his background is reflected in his poetry by its striking use of language.

Reading the poems here, ask them to identify the language or themes that are similar throughout the poems. Keep a record of their findings.

Conclusions

Find out the dates of the different poems – do the messages that they convey change as the war progresses?

Discuss amongst the class if war poems are historical evidence?

Follow up

Find out about the key First World War poets and how they are commemorated.

Lesson 4: Artistic responses to war

Resources:

- Life in Pictures: Understanding Jewish London and its Impact on British Art in the early years of the 20th century
- History Window – [The War Poets: Isaac Rosenberg](#)
- History Window – [The War Poets: Siegfried Sassoon](#)
- History Window – [Poetry and the First World War](#)
- Poems resource
- [The Jewish community in 1914](#)
- [Evelina Hospital for Sick Children](#)
- History window – [Jewish Artists and the First World War](#) – also contains artist profiles for David Bomberg (edited for unit 1 version), Jacob Epstein (more suitable for older groups or higher ability groups), Mark Gertler, Jacob Kramer, Bernard Meninsky (edited for unit 1 version, more suitable for older groups or higher ability groups), Isaac Rosenberg, Clare Winsten and Alfred A Wolmark
- [The Whitechapel Gallery article](#)
- [The map](#)

Lesson Outcomes

Pupils will:

- Have a broad understanding of artistic responses to the First World War
- Will know that people from different walks of life and religions contributed to the war effort
- Will reflect on how the war influenced artists

Enquiry question and leading questions:

Why is it important for artists (including writers) to respond to contemporary and historical events?

- What evidence of an event does an artist/poet provide?
- What legacy does an artistic response have that other historical evidence might not?

Activities

Teachers introduce (remind the class if they have studied earlier lessons) of the historical background to the Jewish community in 1914.

Stage 1

Working in pairs, ask pupils to create a map/spidergram of all the ways that evidence is collected about the past e.g. what are the sources?

Then map in a chart the information they would expect to get about the First World War from the different historical sources e.g. diary = food on the frontline.

Stage 2

Show David Bomberg's picture 'Sappers At Work'

Ask pupils what it can tell them about war? – list their points.

Show the pupils Sassoon's poem 'The Attack' and Rosenberg's 'In the Trenches'

What do these two pieces tell them about the war? – list their points.

Stage 3

Using the findings reached over the lesson, ask each pupil to create a chart (using columns) of the different evidence sources and provide their own opinion on how it can be used to build a picture of the whole war. Make sure that there is a column that denotes the legacy of the evidence e.g.

Source	Information it might give	How the information is presented	Legacy
Poem	Experiencing a gas attack	Through imagery in the poem	The poem is still being used today
Newspaper	Report of a battle	As a newspaper story	It is only occasionally used as a source today.

Conclusions

Some of the men who were artists and poets of the First World War were defined or killed by the conflict.

Discuss whether or not the effect of the war on people's lives affects their representation of the war?

Follow up

Answer the questions at the end of the essay on the Whitechapel gallery:

Things to think about

- Have you ever visited the famous Whitechapel Art Gallery?
- Do you think galleries and museums are boring and full of fusty relics?
- Do you think more people go to see football than go to art galleries?
- What makes a gallery's programme of exhibitions interesting?
- Have you visited any art gallery?
- Did you ever think how one person with a pencil or paintbrush can create magic?
- Is it more interesting to see an exhibition about one artist or about many artists?
- Is painting still interesting today or is new media more relevant and exciting?
- What is the nearest gallery to home?
- Worth a visit?
- Do you know what a 'blue plaque' is and where and why they are awarded?
- If it was your choice, to whom would you dedicate a blue plaque and why?