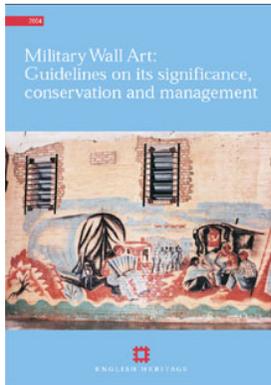




Historic England

Military Wall Art



On 1st April 2015 the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England changed its common name from English Heritage to Historic England. We are now re-branding all our documents.

Although this document refers to English Heritage, it is still the Commission's current advice and guidance and will in due course be re-branded as Historic England.

[Please see our website](#) for up to date contact information, and further advice.

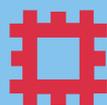
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2004

Military Wall Art: Guidelines on its significance, conservation and management



ENGLISH HERITAGE

Military wall art appears throughout the United Kingdom, on or within buildings that are or once were in military use. Surviving works include murals, pencil sketches, stencils, instructional drawings, signage and simple graffiti, and incorporate both sanctioned and less official forms of decoration.

The content and extent of the artworks are as varied as their locations and reflect the immense variety of hands at work. There exist painted rural scenes in prisoner-of-war camps; defiant images in air raid shelters; emblems, badges, slogans and signs in hangars of the Royal Air Force and United States Air Force; names, dates and cartoons throughout; and at some sites such as Greenham Common (West Berkshire), messages of protest and opposition in the form of painted images on buildings, fence posts and road surfaces. Although protest graffiti is usually found outside military buildings and establishments, it holds special meaning in the military context and can be essential to developing a full understanding of the site and its wider role in society.

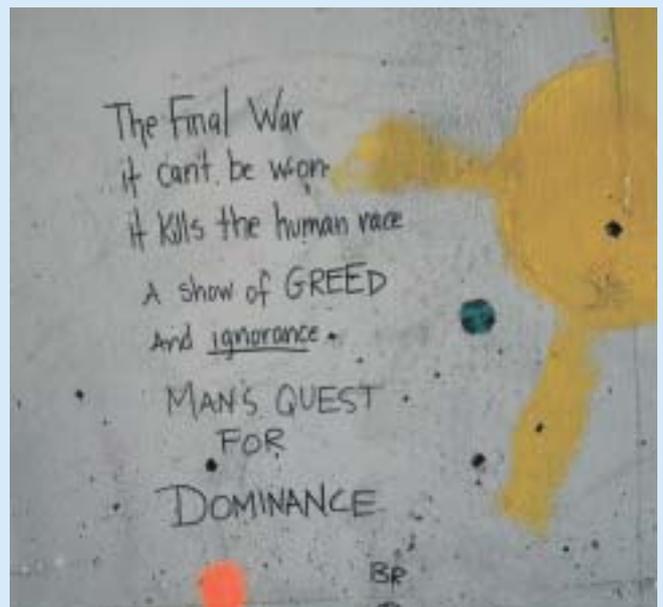
Some wall art is located within sites already considered nationally important, while other examples are of great importance in themselves, even though their site or building is not of sufficient historic interest to merit statutory protection, for example through scheduling or listing.

Whatever the circumstances of its location, the management needs of wall art are often very specific and will be influenced by various factors, including the nature of the site and the extent and condition of the decoration. Conservation *in situ* and permanent retention may not always be appropriate or even feasible, and there may be cases where careful recording is sufficient; in some instances, subsequent detachment or loss may have to be contemplated.

The following guidelines are intended to address these issues, covering the evaluation of significance, and the determination of conservation and management needs.



RAF Bentwaters, Suffolk, 1980s. An aerosol pastiche of an iconic Second World War image by the renowned war photographer Joe Rosenthal showing US marines raising the stars and stripes over Mount Suibachi, Iwo Jima, 23 February 1945 (AA021673)



Protesters' graffiti has significance in providing a balanced historic record and giving military remains a wider social context. This example is in Nevada, USA. (© John Schofield)



Wall art at Stolzenhain, Brandenburg, Germany: an example of patriotic Soviet wall art in the cultural centre of an elite KGB unit tasked with guarding nuclear warheads. (© Wayne Cocroft)

WHAT IS MILITARY WALL ART?

Military wall art can be defined as any decoration deliberately applied to, or executed on, the surface of a building or site in the context of its military use or occupation. It may even be regarded as a distinctive type of folk art. The type of ornamentation and the materials used vary considerably, and can include paint, aerosols, graphite and marker pens, or can be achieved through scratches or incisions in the surface or even by making impressions with objects, such as those made by pressing a bayonet and ammunition clip into wet surface render at Sywell airfield (Northamptonshire).

Military wall art survives on a variety of former and existing military sites, the main ones being airfields, army and prisoner-of-war camps, air-raid shelters, radar stations, coast batteries and domestic accommodation such as barracks. Some examples have been recorded by English Heritage photographers in recent years, including at airbases such as Greenham Common (West Berkshire), Upper

Heyford (Oxfordshire), Bentwaters (Suffolk), and the prisoner-of-war camps at Harperley (Co Durham) and Brigg (Lincolnshire). The future management needs of these sites will directly affect the future of the wall art. For example, at Harperley it will be preserved within the context of a scheduled monument, while at Brigg part of the camp has been destroyed and its wall art remains in a vulnerable state in some of the surviving buildings. The potential exists for wall art to survive on almost any remaining military or former military site, from a single isolated pillbox to an airfield.

MILITARY WALL ART – TYPES AND LOCATION

Studies of military wall art can contribute a great deal to the understanding of the occupation and use of military sites. Some areas are painted primarily with instructional imagery; others host private images – particularly graffiti – intended only for those living and working in the space. Subjects may reflect a reaction to warfare, and most especially to



RAF Bentwaters, Suffolk, 1980s. This image, executed on the interior wall of an ammunition inspection building, shows Death in a contemporary olive-green uniform holding a large-calibre cannon round. (AA021681)

confinement. The intensely personal words and drawings of prisoners of war and conscientious objectors still have the power to move the viewer, and to illuminate the personal stories underlying the broader history of war. Casual graffiti also served to alleviate an aspect of service absent from most military history books: boredom, whether on routine guard duty or active stand-by, waiting for something to happen.

Increased understanding of military wall art will benefit from being cross-cultural. The graffiti typically found on United States bases dating from the 1980s is firmly rooted in contemporary street culture and is in strong contrast with the more restrained RAF artwork, which is often restricted to a unit badge. Wall art of the Eastern Bloc is different again, being more formulaic and politically ordained. Recording and in some cases preserving this wall art contributes to the study of these cultural differences as they took shape during the 20th century.

Wall art is a valuable contemporary, personal and direct representation of 20th-century military activity and the opposition to it. Diversity of form, widespread survival at sites throughout Britain, and its high quality make it a significant, if currently rather undervalued, archaeological and art historical resource.

The wall art encountered on most military bases served to promote group cohesion, reinforcing *l'esprit de corps*. Not infrequently it was a means of establishing boundaries between different groups sharing 'ownership' of the space, and even the resulting rivalries. Unofficial artwork



Details of graffiti drawn by conscientious objectors on cell walls at Richmond Castle, Yorkshire, in 1916. Decisions were made to restrict physical access to the small detention cells due to the significance and extreme fragility of the graffiti.

could be used to personalise tightly-controlled areas occupied by individuals or small groups, as for example ammunition handling. This type of decoration often incorporates unit emblems and is sometimes based on the nicknames of those units. It often unashamedly celebrates the prowess of the equipment operated by the unit.

Art by prisoners of war

Art associated with prisoner-of-war camps and other places of incarceration dates back to at least the Middle Ages; well-known examples include the graffiti and

emblems carved by prisoners in the Tower of London, the French Napoleonic graffiti at Portchester Castle, Hampshire, and graffiti on the cell walls at Yorkshire's Richmond Castle drawn by conscientious objectors in 1916. Yet, surviving wall art from 20th-century prisoner-of-war camps is surprisingly rare, reflecting the poor survival of this class of site. At Harperley, a purpose-built Second World War camp occupied at different dates by both Italian and German prisoners of war, surviving cartoons and poignant images of an idyllic homeland offer an indication of what may have been lost elsewhere in the camp.

In contrast the Island Farm camp, near Bridgend, Wales, was originally built as a munitions-workers' hostel and was occupied as a prisoner-of-war camp on two separate occasions by different grades of prisoner. At this site there was a wide variety of wall art including mottos, military shields (including two with SS insignia), various landscapes and female figures. The use of wall art at Island Farm has a further significance, as one painting of a reclining female was used to distract the attention of guards away from the entrance to an escape tunnel in Hut 9.

Graffiti and other 'unofficial' decoration

The treatment of unofficial military wall art closely reflects variations in the official attitudes to 'despoiling' government property. In wartime rules were likely to be relaxed; at other times military order might be re-established by a coat of white wash.

Once out of use, military sites often exist in a state of abandonment. In this condition they are often reused, depending on their location, for a variety of purposes. At Betchworth, near Box in Surrey, the early 20th-century mobilisation centre was used in the 1970s and 80s as the venue for parties, and the colourful murals that survive clearly date from this time. While not directly relevant to the site's prime purpose, this art is an integral part of the site's history and should be treated as such. It should never be removed without record or erased as being irrelevant and merely damaging to earlier graffiti.



Wall art can contribute to our understanding of the continued use of a building once it has fallen out of military use; this graffiti at Betchworth Mobilisation Centre, Surrey, may date to the 1970s and 80s. (© Roger J C Thomas)

IDENTIFICATION AND ASSESSMENT

Identification

The first step in the evaluation and assessment of decoration within military sites is ensuring that the extent of existing art has been clearly established. Areas of graffiti, or of any highly-fragmented and degraded painted decoration, are easy to overlook, especially given the large numbers and size of buildings at military complexes. Problems can also arise from the common instinct to see graffiti as being a 'non-regulation' intervention to the building and something to be removed or covered over.

Careful and thorough examination of the sites is therefore crucial, with any areas of deliberate decoration being tagged and taken into consideration as part of the overall site assessment.

Initial characterisation of military wall art must be pragmatic and take into account both the practical and logistical limitations of managing large and complex sites, which are likely to have undergone multiple phases of use. Areas felt to be of potential interest and significance need to be clearly identified and located within the overall site plan.

Should works or building alterations be imminent, temporary protection may be required in advance of conservation and management decisions, to prevent inadvertent damage.



RAF Alconbury, Cambridgeshire. Mural in the mess of 511th Tactical Fighter Squadron 'The Vultures'; this unit was equipped with A-10 aircraft nicknamed 'Warthogs'. (AA023744)

A note of caution should be sounded when characterising wall art, as some wartime huts have been repainted by television and film companies: a Nissen hut at RAF Binbrook, for example, was decorated with wall art for the filming of *Memphis Belle* in 1989.

Assessment

The assessment and evaluation of art and decoration remaining on military sites is not always straightforward. Links to active regiments or individuals, as well as the social implications of strong direct messages, must be balanced against an objective overview of the material in the context of the individual site and its current designation, and of other sites.

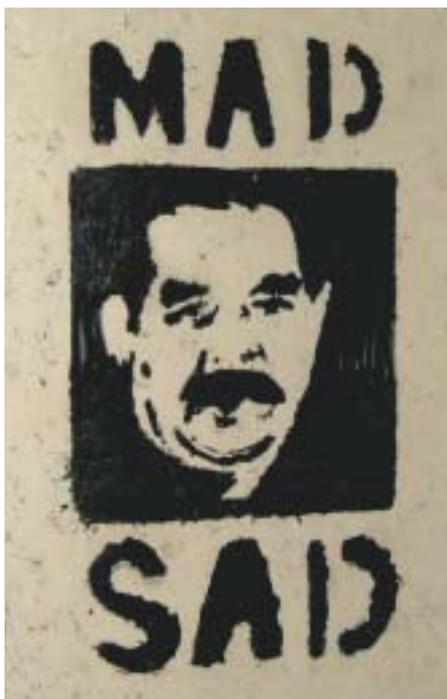
Given the significance and vulnerability of 20th-century wall art, the local Historic Environment Record Officer should be consulted whenever development proposals or minor building works will have an impact. Certainly this will be required whenever the works fall into one or more of the 'more significant' categories. The following is not an exhaustive list, however wall art would normally be considered to have particular significance if it comprises either:

- mural decoration dating from the Second World War or earlier, particularly where it can be attributed to a particular social or military

group, such as an RAF unit or a prisoner-of-war camp, or a local community perhaps identified through artistic expression in a communal air-raid shelter

- wall art of the Cold War, particularly where it occurs on air bases where key units at the heart of nuclear deterrent strategy were deployed, or instructional wall art in buildings which served some particular purpose; examples might include Cold War experimental sites where graffiti or signage provides clues to the building's use and role within the site
- examples of wall art that are either exceptionally well-preserved, stable and *in situ*, or are considered to have high artistic merit. Also in this category might be examples of collective decoration that together form a coherent group, such as a group of paintings on the walls of a single building
- decoration that has particular historic significance, either in relation to a specific event, or being the work of an established or well-known artist or well-known person.

In these cases more extensive consultation may be useful, and a number of sources of information and assistance are provided at the end of the leaflet.

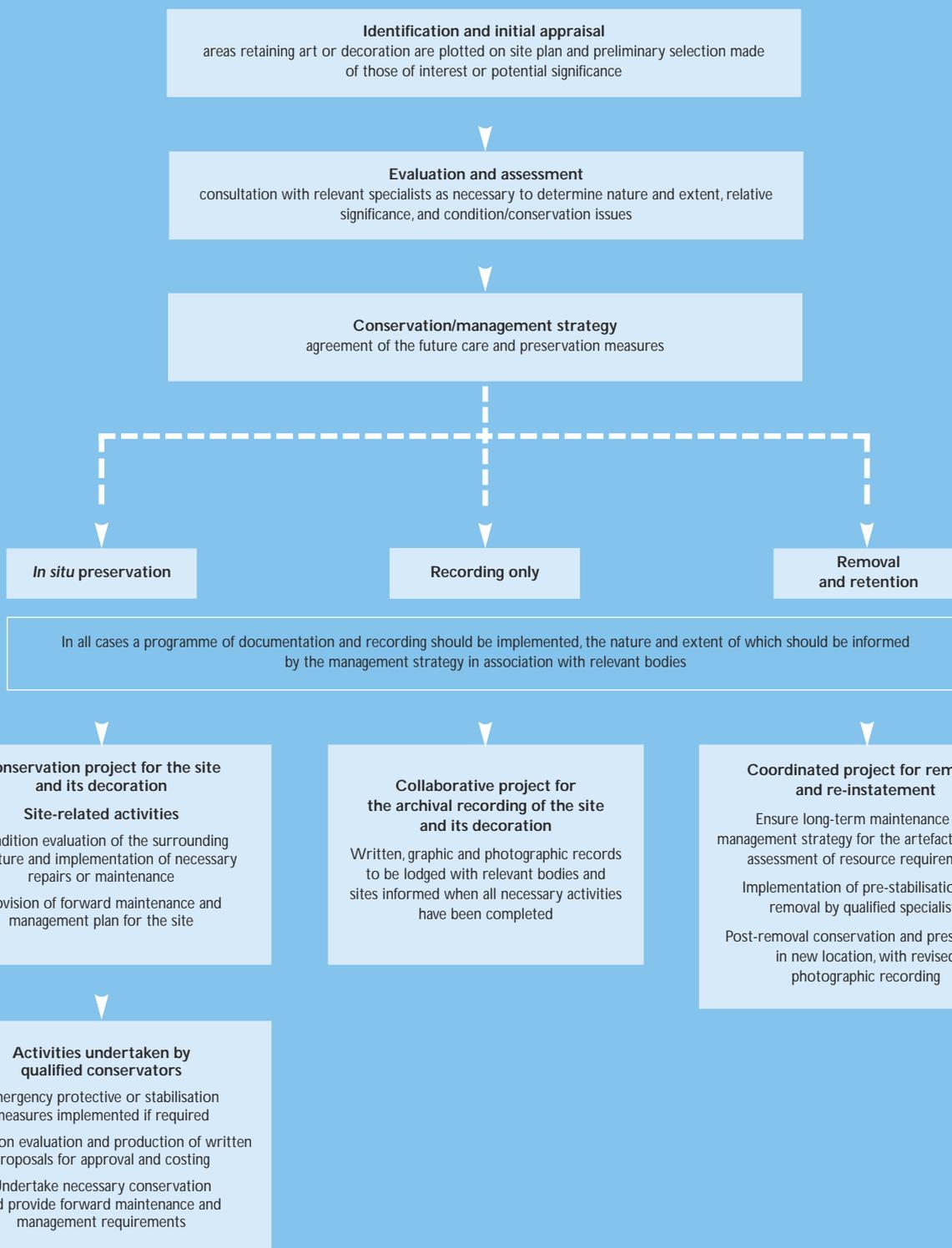


During both the First and Second World Wars, and subsequently, stencils and spray paint were used to produce repeatable images. A range of designs have been found including this one in a Royal Navy isolation magazine. (© Roger J C Thomas)

DETERMINING CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The following summary table provides a schematic sequence of the stages needed in developing an appropriate conservation and management strategy for military wall art.

KEY STAGES FOR DEALING WITH MILITARY WALL ART

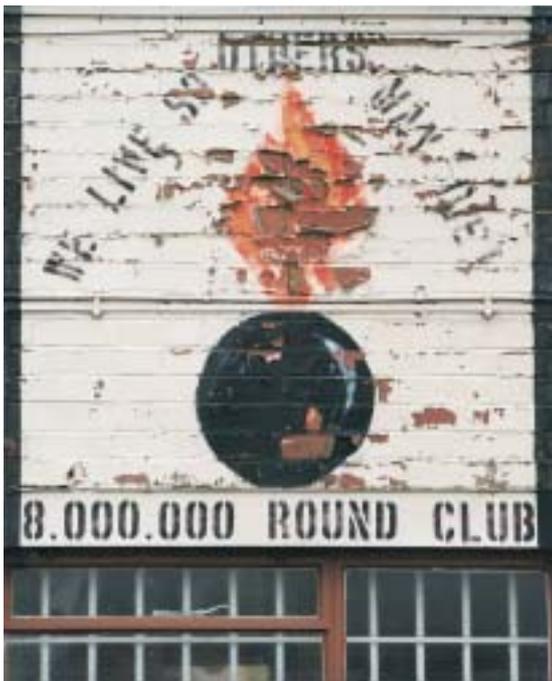


DEVELOPMENT OF CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Once wall art has been identified and its significance assessed, an appropriate conservation and management strategy must be agreed between all relevant parties. Such parties would normally include archaeological curators as well as the site owners, with additional input from other specialists such as conservators and historians, though this will depend on the nature of the site.

In the case of scheduled monuments and listed buildings, prior consent is required for works that impact on any paintings within the building or monument. For listed sites this may also be relevant to wall art surviving in its curtilage. For scheduled monuments and Grade I and II* listed buildings the English Heritage regional team should be consulted in the first instance. For Grade II listed buildings contact should be with the local planning authority. Where wall art survives *in situ* and is felt to have particular significance in the terms described above, English Heritage's designation team should be consulted.

Military wall art is inherently fragile and susceptible to physical damage, weathering and vandalism. Wall art, prosaic signs, lettering and instructions, including markings on floor surfaces and concrete hardstandings, may all contain



RAF Bentwaters, Suffolk: 'We live so others may die! 8,000,000 Round Club'. Images painted on external walls are very vulnerable to weathering, in particular when modern impermeable paints are used. (AA021677)

PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORDING OF WALL ART

Accurate and competent photographic recording will be appropriate where *in situ* preservation is impossible, or where removal is impractical. The choice of photographic equipment, materials and technique will vary according to the work of art and the conditions of its location and preservation. Such work is technically demanding and not something to be taken on lightly. Indeed forensic standards and techniques should be adopted to obtain the maximum amount of information. A number of basic principles do however remain constant and should form the basis of any recording brief.

Equipment

- Camera: minimum requirement of a good quality 35-mm, or 6 to 9-Megapixel digital SLR with a range of lenses including a macro lens. Ideal requirement is medium format SLR, or 4 x 5 large-format camera using either a film or digital back
- Tripod
- Cable release
- Filters: polarising, red, far red, infra-red transmission and absorption
- Portable electronic flash with a large guide number and battery capacity
- Flash filters: infra-red and ultra-violet transmission filters
- Tape measure and note book

Materials

- ISO 100/21" or lower speed, colour film
- False-colour infra-red film
- ISO 400/27" or lower speed, black and white film
- Infra-red black and white colour film

Viewpoint

Six basic view points should always be sought:

- general site view of building
- exterior view of relevant building
- general view of location of artwork within a room or building
- pictorial image of artwork
- 'square-on' record photograph featuring an appropriate measurement scale and Kodak positive colour scale on edge of image area
- any other relevant details.

valuable information about the former use of structures. They are all therefore worthy of, at the very least, a good level of documentation. In many instances detailed and contextual colour

photography – preferably using medium- or large-format cameras – will be sufficient, though depending on the future care and preservation plans, more accurate archival recording may be required using methods such as photogrammetry. Whatever method is employed, recording must always include all associated information such as location, size, and placement. The function and other associations of the structure should also be analysed and noted.

CONSERVATION OPTIONS

While the detailed nature of any decision will necessarily be unique to each situation, there are three major options that can be considered in dealing with military wall art:

- retain and preservation *in situ*
- record and leave as found
- remove by detachment and relocate

In situ preservation

Ideally, important and significant military wall art – in particular that found within listed buildings or on scheduled or otherwise significant sites and monuments – should be conserved *in situ* as an integral part of the historic fabric of the site, and maintained within its appropriate context. The conservation of wall art is directly aligned with wall painting conservation practice, though in many cases there is likely to be a mixture of non-traditional materials (such as pen, marker, house paint and graphite) which react and age in very different ways.

Qualified wall painting conservators will therefore be required to assess condition and conservation requirements. These will include remedial treatment of the work itself and issues relating to site presentation, and will therefore be of assistance when determining levels and methods of documentation.

Any conservation proposals must form part of a coordinated programme of conservation for the site, which should incorporate all necessary building repairs

and maintenance to ensure that the decoration is safe and secure over the longer term. Conservators can also be expected to advise on the longer-term visual monitoring and maintenance requirements of the wall art, as well as identifying the potential impact of changes in the use or occupation of the building.

Recording

For cases where the surviving decoration is of limited interest, or where conservation is not practical due to the cost or scale of proposed alterations, the most sensible course of action will often simply be to carefully document the wall art rather than undertake any deliberate conservation. This decision, which allows for eventual loss, must of course be based on adequate consultation. In such cases, those responsible for the sites need to ensure that the documentation is sufficiently

comprehensive and is distributed immediately to all appropriate archives.

Paintings on building exteriors are particularly vulnerable to weathering and remedial conservation may not be feasible over the long term. The resulting dilemmas are well illustrated by the conservation problems faced by the Berlin conservation authorities, obliged to deal with the decay of the 'East Side Gallery', a 1.3km-stretch of the Berlin Wall decorated by many international artists in 1990. Rather than attempt to conserve the Gallery itself, the original artists were invited to make copies of their work, which have been termed 'second originals'.

Detachment

It may prove impossible to retain certain military wall art in its original location, no matter how important the work. Physical alterations or repairs may be necessary, or

the building may be cited for demolition as part of the site's redevelopment. As a last resort, removal of the decoration through physical detachment and relocation may sometimes be considered. This is the most invasive of interventions, which results in the complete loss of the art's context and introduces problems for long-term conservation and preservation. Detachment must therefore be carefully evaluated against the case for only recording the scheme, or against rethinking ways of retaining the site.

Detachment of integral decoration requires specialist conservation expertise, and if properly undertaken will be a costly and painstaking process. Determination of the most appropriate methods will depend on the nature of the wall art and the building. Methods can range from the detachment of the paint layer alone from the wall surface through to complete extraction of the appropriate section of wall. Influencing factors include size and location of the artwork, the original materials and techniques used and its current condition. In all cases, the act of removal will inevitably damage the original, and there will be further losses during relocation and post-removal treatment. The physical removal of wall art should only be undertaken once a complete photographic record has been made, and great care should be taken to ensure the removal procedures do not damage adjacent artwork.

It is essential that a forward strategy is agreed for the presentation and care of wall art sections. There is little sense in saving a piece of wall art if there is no secure home for it, or if the resources to ensure that it will be preserved in the long-term are not available.

A number of former airfields are beginning to acknowledge their aviation heritage through small museums or displays, and these museums may be able to act as concentration points for wall art threatened by demolition or redevelopment. However, many of these organisations don't currently have the capacity or resources to take responsibility for *ex situ* wall art.

Physical removal and retention of military wall art must therefore take into account:

- the ownership of and responsibility for the artefact once removed from site
- the future presentation and the need for associated interpretation
- the necessary allocation of resources for both the removal and the long-term preservation of the artefact in its agreed new location.



The deterioration of this image, in the prisoner-of-war camp at Pingley Farm, Lincolnshire, is directly related to the ongoing dilapidation of the building, which has caused direct water ingress. (© Roger J C Thomas)



East Side Gallery, Mühlenstrasse, Berlin. Tolerance by Mary Mackey of Denver, Colorado, photographed in September 2000 shortly after the image was repainted by the artist. (© Wayne Cocroft)

FURTHER READING

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Saunders, N J *Trench Art*. Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 2002

Images of wall art and of the buildings in which it survives can be viewed at the following websites:

www.subbrit.org.uk

www.bunkertours.com

www.ghostbase.org

www.berlinwallart.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

English Heritage is the Government's statutory advisor on archaeology, conservation and the management of the historic environment in England. Further information can be obtained from:

English Heritage
23 Savile Row
London
W1S 2ET
Tel: 020 7973 3000

National Monuments Record Centre
Kemble Drive
Swindon
SN2 2GZ
Tel: 01793 414600

We also have nine regional offices each of which includes archaeologists and historic buildings specialists. Regional teams can be contacted at:

South East
Eastgate Court
195-205 High Street
Guildford GU1 3EH
Telephone: 01483 252000

South West
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Telephone: 0191 261 1585

North West
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3 Chepstow Street
Manchester M1 5FW
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Yorkshire
37 Tanner Row
York YO1 6WP
Telephone: 01904 601901

The English Heritage website, www.english-heritage.org.uk, contains information on conservation work, recent military remains and has numerous of our publications in downloadable form.

The Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO) represents local authorities that maintain archaeological services across the UK. Details including a list of members can be obtained from www.algao.org.uk.

Organisations that can offer conservation advice and access to specialist conservators:

United Kingdom Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (UKIC) is the professional body representing conservators who work in both public institutions and the private sector. UKIC participates in an accreditation scheme (under the auspices of the National Council for Conservation-Restoration) and accredited members use the acronym ACR (Accredited conservator-restorer) or AMUKIC (Accredited Member of UKIC). The Institute also maintains *The Conservation Register* (see below).

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SE1 7QY
Tel: 020 7721 8721
Fax: 020 7721 8722
E-mail: ukic@ukic.org.uk
www.ukic.org.uk

The Conservation Register is a national database maintained by UKIC containing details of accredited independent conservators and conservation practices that provide specialist conservation services and advice. The *Register* is designed to help potential clients make informed choices and offers advice on choosing and working with a conservator.

For information on conservators and conservation practices

Tel: 020 7721 8246
E-mail: register@ukic.org.uk

The Twentieth Century Society (formerly The Thirties Society) was founded to safeguard the architectural and design heritage of Britain dating from 1914 onwards.

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Published July 2004

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Prepared by Wayne Cocroft, Danielle
Devlin, Robert Gowing, John Schofield
and Roger J C Thomas
Edited and brought to press by
Adèle Campbell
Designed by Neil Collins
Produced by English Heritage Publishing
Printed by Vitesse

Product code 50923

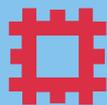
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Cover image: Spring Quarry, Corsham, Wiltshire. Canteens in the underground factories were decorated with floor-to-ceiling murals by Olga Lehmann. (AA026523)

Back cover image: Second World War painted theatre stage in the west wing batteries at Hurst Castle, Hampshire.



ENGLISH HERITAGE