CAMOUFLAGE
THE EXHIBITION

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Canadian War Museum
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A BRIEF HISTORY OF MILITARY CAMOUFLAGE

Prototype boot – Pittards, U.K., 2005. Photo © Imperial War Museum, London, U.K.

Military camouflage has had a relatively short but incredible life. It has served in two world wars, gained notoriety as a symbol of protest and rebellion, attracted the attention of fashion designers and recording stars, and found acceptance in the mainstream of popular culture. Its history has been shaped by the advance of technology, the ingenuity of soldiers and the imagination of artists.

Seminal events in the history of camouflage include the invention of long-range small arms and artillery, the introduction of aerial reconnaissance, the creation — and later mass production — of "disruptive pattern" designs, and the American involvement in the Vietnam War. Famous people in the history of camouflage include artists such as Andy Warhol, fashion icons such as Yves Saint Laurent and performers such as Joe Strummer of The Clash.

Origins

- In the natural world, camouflage is as old and as common as predators and prey. From the earth tones of the aardvark to the bold spots of the leopard, colours and shapes that blend with natural surroundings make the hunter and the hunted harder to see or recognize. But military camouflage as we understand it today dates only from the First World War, when the word "camouflage" itself first entered the French and English languages (derived from a French word meaning to "make up for the stage").

- For several centuries before the outbreak of the First World War, most major battles occurred in open fields, at close quarters and between opposing lines of soldiers armed with muskets, pikes or swords. Soldiers were seldom concealed or disguised — they wore brightly coloured uniforms to embolden the wearer, intimidate the enemy, distinguish friend from foe and facilitate communication.

- In the late 19th century, the advent of quick-firing and more accurate small arms and artillery — as well as the introduction of machine guns — began to profoundly transform the nature of battlefield combat. This also affected the colour and type of military uniforms.

First World War: Eyes in the skies

Helmet, Hand-Painted Disruptive Pattern Design, United States, 1914-1918
Canadian War Museum
CWM 1977535-004

- By the start of the First World War in 1914, entire armies were clad in single-shade, drab uniforms that made their wearers less conspicuous and therefore less vulnerable to the power of modern weapons. British and Canadian troops wore khaki; the Germans field grey. The French army entered the war in its traditional blue tunics and red trousers (many soldiers considered camouflage "unchivalrous") but soon switched to a more subtle "horizon blue".
- The next revolution in military camouflage was sparked by the introduction in the First World War of aerial reconnaissance. Airborne spotters could direct artillery fire and gather vital intelligence about enemy forces far behind the front lines. Concealment and deception became a military imperative, especially in relation to large objects such as artillery, vehicles and buildings.

This is a rare example of a hand-painted Allied helmet from the First World War. American forces, who learned camouflage techniques from the French and British, also established their own camouflage service and school of instruction.

- In 1914, two French artists, Lucien-Victor Guirand de Scévola and Eugène Corbin, came up with an ingenious answer for the concealment of large weapons. Serving in the same artillery regiment (but working independently of each other), they began painting irregular shapes in various colours onto sections of canvas that were then suspended over the guns. The patterns broke up the shape of the weapons and made them harder to identify from the air. The technique became known as "disruptive pattern" — the foundation of modern camouflage.

- Buoyed by the success of those experiments, the French Army created a camouflage section in 1915, headed by Guirand de Scévola. He employed avant-garde and figurative painters, sculptors and designers to apply disruptive pattern designs on guns and vehicles. Other armies soon followed the French lead. By the war's end in 1918, every major combatant had a camouflage section, some employing thousands of people.

- The British Army supplied its sharpshooters with hand-painted disruptive pattern sniper suits, and the German Army created a brightly coloured design for its soldiers to paint on their steel helmets. But the use of disruptive pattern camouflage on uniforms was not widespread in the First World War. One reason: the machinery required to print the irregular designs on fabric was not developed until the 1920s.

Dazzle on the High Seas

Ship Model, Dazzle Painted , Imperial War Museum

- The most striking use of disruptive design during the First World War was the application of "dazzle" painting on British warships and supply vessels. These were painted bow to stern and hull to funnels with contrasting colours in colossal, bold, modernist designs. Some called them "floating art galleries." The idea was to make it difficult for enemy submariners or coastal gunners to discern the vessel's size, shape and course. By war's end, more than 2,300 British ships had been dazzle painted.

- Shipping losses declined drastically after dazzle was introduced, although most historians today attribute the decline to the adoption at the same time of the convoy system. Nevertheless, dazzle boosted the confidence and morale of Allied sailors and captured the imagination of artists and the public alike.

- Another important focus of French and British "camoufleurs" during the First World War was the design and production of dummies and decoys to deceive the enemy on the Western Front. Among their products were lifelike dummy heads created by sculptor Henri Bouchard. When popped above the lip of a trench, the dummy would draw enemy sniper fire. More devious was the design and construction of observation posts disguised as actual trees. The real tree would be cut down under cover of darkness and the look-alike fake erected in its place, giving observers a safe and privileged view of the battlefield.

Second World War: Decoys and Dummies

- Advances in weapons and aircraft technology made concealment and deception even more important during the Second World War. As a consequence, camouflage became more sophisticated and its use more widespread than ever before.

- German troops were the first to go into battle wearing machine-made disruptive pattern uniforms. Other nations followed with their own designs, although the new-look uniforms were usually reserved for paratroopers or other special forces.

- Decoys and dummies were sometimes used on a grand scale to exaggerate the strength of armed forces or to divert enemy resources. In the open deserts of North Africa and the Middle East, the Allies created phantom armies of dummy tanks, artillery and troops. In British cities threatened by enemy bombers, factory roofs were painted to look like row houses; railway stations were draped in netting and foliage; and grass runways were painted with strips of tar that appeared from the air as hedgerows.

- Most famously, the Western Allies' 1944 D-Day landings were preceded by one of the most complex deception operations ever mounted. Operation Fortitude fooled German intelligence into believing that the main invasion force would land not in Normandy but in the Pas de Calais further east along the French coast. Operation Fortitude involved the construction of fake oil tanks, jetties and anti-aircraft emplacements, plus the building of phony tanks, airplanes and landing craft.

Vietnam and Counterculture

- At the end of the Second World War, disruptive pattern camouflage was still largely confined to special military units. The Vietnam War helped transform camouflage into a military and pop culture phenomenon.

- American military advisors arriving in Vietnam in the late 1950s began wearing the tiger-stripe camouflage of the South Vietnamese Marine Corps. The black and green pattern was well suited to jungle warfare and became a source of prestige for the Americans who wore it.

- The American military's subsequent "Woodland" pattern, produced in several variants, was considered attractive, practical and warrior-like. It was soon imitated by armed forces around the world.

- By the mid-1960s, the same uniform had become a symbol of anti-war protest, as some American Vietnam veterans who opposed the war demonstrated against it while wearing their uniforms. Inexpensive camouflage clothing also began flooding army surplus stores. It proved irresistible to a young, rebellious generation. "Camo" became a symbol of group identity and was often worn to make anti-establishment or anti-fashion statements.

The painting depicts a Canadian sniper during the Korean War (1950-1953). Ted Zuber, the artist, had been a machine-gunner and sniper in this conflict and, years later, completed several works based on his experiences.

The Hunters
Painted by Ted Zuber in 1978
Beaverbrook Collection of War Art
CWM 19890152-001

- Artists and designers began experimenting with the concepts of camouflage and disruptive pattern. Italian artist Alighiero e Boetti turned a piece of surplus camouflage fabric into a work of art to draw attention to its shapes and colours. Andy Warhol used camouflage as a motif in a series of prints and paintings. Singers and musicians, such as punk rocker Joe Strummer of The Clash, have also appeared on stage in camouflage.

Camouflage Today

- By the mid-1990s, camouflage had been elevated from urban chic to haute couture. It was embraced on a large scale by some of the world's top fashion designers and labels including Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, Jean Paul Gaultier, Christian Dior, maharishi and Yves Saint Laurent. For some designers, it was no longer a symbol of militarism, protest or rebellion, but one of aesthetic power, environmental awareness or commercial utility.

This helmet cover, issued to the Canadian Forces in 1997, was the first example of Canadian Disruptive Pattern camouflage, or CADPAT, which remains in use more than a decade later. The four-colour pattern is computer generated from digital images of various landscapes and printed with special inks that provide a low infrared signature. The cover also comes in a three-colour desert pattern called Arid Regions.

Helmet and Cover, CADPAT Temperate Woodland Pattern, Canada
CWM 20020045-1172

- Today, disruptive pattern camouflage is one of the most popular design motifs in the world, decorating everything from skateboards to high heels. It also remains an essential military tool.

- Advances in detection technology — including radar, thermal imaging and satellite reconnaissance — are changing the nature of camouflage and how it may be counteracted. The avant-garde artists of the First World War — the grandparents of modern camouflage — have been replaced by a new generation of scientists and engineers. Aircraft once painted with disruptive patterns are now designed with stealth technology, and uniforms once painted by hand are designed and manufactured with the aid of sophisticated computer programs.

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