

False Colors: Art, Design and Modern Camouflage

The story of artists' involvement in
modern military camouflage
by Roy R. Behrens

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Chapter One

Hundreds of Differences All Fitting In Together

Esthetics, Anesthetics and Gestalt Theory

In 1923, Max Wertheimer, one of the founders of Gestalt psychology, published an innovative paper titled "The Laws of Organization in Perceptual Forms."¹¹ Among his students at the Psychological Institute at the University of Berlin, it was nicknamed Wertheimer's *Punktarbeit* or "dot paper" because virtually all its examples were abstract patterns made of dots.

One of Wertheimer's graduate students was Rudolf Arnheim, a 19-year-old Jewish-German student who had grown up in Berlin and whose father owned a piano factory. Arnheim's major was in psychology, which was then a branch of philosophy, with a double minor in the histories of art and music. It was the interplay of these four academic disciplines—philosophy, psychology, art and music—that provided the groundwork for his subsequent trailblazing writings about the psychology of art.¹²

Art is the imposing of a pattern on experience, and our aesthetic enjoyment is the recognition of that pattern.

—ARNHEIM NORTH
WESTHEAD
Dialogues, p. 228

4 FIGURE 1.A
Gust Kautz
Preparatory drawing for a poster
illustration titled *Apes in Bath*
(After the Bath).



4 FIGURE 4.B
American painter
Thomas Hart Benton,
Photograph by Peter A. and
Paul Jolly.

[Serving as a U.S. Navy camouflage] was the most important thing, so far. I [Thomas Hart Benton] had ever done for myself as [an] artist. The mechanical construction of building the new airplanes, the blimps, the dirigibles, the ships of the base, because they were so interesting in themselves, tore me away from all my grooved habits, from my play with colored cubes and classic attenuations, from my aesthetic drawings and morbid self-concerns.

Thomas Hart Benton
quoted in Adams (1995),
p. 87.

terns, up-to-date designs of stripes in black and white or pale blue and deep ultramarine, and earlier designs of curves, patches, and semicircles. Take all these, huddle them together in what appears to be hopeless confusion, but which in reality is perfect order, bow and stern pointing in all directions, mix in a little sunshine, add the varied and sparkling reflections, stir the hotchpotch up with smoke, life, and incessant movement, and it can safely be said that the word 'dazzle' is not far from the mark."^{4,7}

Riding in a convoy of dazzle-painted ships, a journalist said, was "like being in the middle of a floating art museum," while others spoke of dazzled ships as "so many floating cubist paintings," "a futurist's bad dream," "cubist painting on a colossal scale" and "a cross between a boiler explosion and a railroad accident."^{4,8} "You should see our fleet!" exclaimed an American newspaper, "It's camouflaged so, it looks like a flock of sea-going Easter Eggs. If you shut your eyes good and tight, and stand behind a wall, you can't see a ship a cable's length away. It was an English guy [Wilkinson] thought of it first, and his name's the first toast now at all the paint-makers' social reunions."^{4,9}

But was it Norman Wilkinson who first thought of dazzle painting? Not according to an American naval manual, prepared in 1961, which contended that Abbott Thayer had devised "a system of course- and type-decep-

CHAPTER FOUR: A FLOCK OF SEA-GOING EASTER EGGS



[Norman] Wilkinson reported that dazzle saved many ships from destruction. Although a number of the decorated vessels were hit by torpedoes, "a far larger percentage of these made port than ships painted light grey, owing to the submarine making an erratic shot, and so injuring the vessel in a less vital spot."

Richard Cox
A Bear Truth, p. 233.



4 FIGURES 4.T, 4.U
and 4.V (top to bottom) U.S.
WWI ship camouflage applied
to [from top to bottom] U.S.
Destroyer O'Brien, U.S. Destroyer
U.S. Sennett (both May 1918),
and U.S. Center Neboune
(October 1918).



■ THIS IS a fascinating account of the role of hundreds of artists, designers, and architects who served as army, navy, and civilian camouflage experts (called *camoufleurs*) during both World Wars.

Described and illustrated are ingenious and often amusing attempts at "fooling the eye" by such prominent artists (from France, England, the US, and Germany) as Abbott H. Thayer, Jean-Louis Forain, André Dunoyer de Segonzac, Jacques Villon, Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, Norman Wilkinson, Everett Warner, Sherry Fry, Barry Faulkner, Homer Saint-Gaudens, John Singer Sargent, Frederic Waugh, Edward Seago, Blair Hughes-Stanton, Charles Burchfield, Oskar Schlemmer, Franz Marc, Edward Wadsworth, William Stanley Hayter, Roland Penrose, Julian Trevelyan, Eric Sloane, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Gyorgy Kepes, Jon Gnagy, Arshile Gorky, Victor Papenek, and Ellsworth Kelly.

Illustrated by 120 artworks, diagrams, and vintage photographs, the book explains how strategies used to conceal or distort the appearance of things in nature and war depend on the same "unit-forming factors" that artists, designers, and architects use every day in the creation of paintings, prints, typefaces, logos, page layouts, web sites, furniture, buildings, and so on.

Throughout the book, the author makes shrewd observations about the connections of art, design, and camouflage to such seemingly wide-ranging topics as Gestalt psychology, esthetics, Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, psychoanalysis, kindergarten, creativity, the Bauhaus, Frank Lloyd Wright, humor, dream analysis, Rockwell Kent, poetry, pickpockets, and sleight of hand.

Of additional interest are a camouflage timeline, an account of the etymology of *camouflage*, and a 10-page bibliography (the largest ever compiled) on the subject of art and camouflage.

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Notes and Acknowledgments

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