

Secret history: how surrealism can win a war

An exhibition reveals how camouflage was created by an unlikely regiment of artists, writes Mark Fisher

Think of artists in relation to war and you imagine pacifism and protest. You remember Pablo Picasso decrying brutality in *Guernica*, Wilfred Owen writing poetry in the trenches, or John Lennon giving peace a chance in his bed. But in times of emergency, a nation must draw on all its talents, which is how some of the leading names of early-20th-century art came to apply their creative skills to the battle against fascism.

An exhibition opening this week at Edinburgh's Dean Gallery highlights the role of fine artists, designers and architects in the creation of camouflage, one of the army's most vital defence techniques.

To create camouflage requires an understanding of light, shape and colour, skills central to visual art. By the time of the second world war, the armed forces knew they'd need artists such as Roland Penrose, Ashley Havinden and James McIntosh Patrick to help develop their optical illusions.

"Their background in surrealism, cubism and modernism was a great help," says Ann Simpson, curator of *Artists and Camouflage*. "Picasso, for example, was fascinated by the idea of concealment and camouflage and a lot of his work was drawn on by these artists."

It wasn't until the 20th century that the idea of soldiers evading detection — as opposed to drawing attention to themselves — gained widespread acceptance. Traditionally, the military had preferred to scare opponents with bright colours and striking designs — something the French would pay for dearly at the start of the first world war when their troops' red trousers made them fatally easy targets.

Setting up the world's first camouflage corps in 1915, the French army employed painters, architects and theatre designers to develop hand-painted uniforms for front-line troops. In command was Lucien-Victor Guirand de Scévola, an academic painter who'd been impressed by the disorientating qualities of cubism and saw the military potential of such flat geometric shapes.

It might be surprising now, but this early connection with artists made sense. At the turn of the century, it had been a painter, the American Abbott Handerson Thayer, who had observed how the clever use of colour helped animals to hide from predators. "Nature has evolved actual art on the bodies of animals and only an artist can read it," he argued in one of his more self-aggrandising proclamations.

In the UK, the army introduced its Camouflage Section at the end of 1916, while at sea, the marine painter Norman Wilkinson invented the concept of "dazzle painting" — a way of using stripes and disrupted lines to confuse the enemy about the speed and dimensions of a ship.

These techniques took off in earnest during the second world war — with artists at the forefront. Chief among them was Penrose, a Quaker, pacifist and surrealist — and friend of modern art luminaries such as Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Man Ray and Picasso — who held equally strong beliefs about the menace of fascism. He co-founded the Industrial Camouflage Research Unit, a commercial venture offering protection to factories, which was absorbed by the army to help the war effort.

"His lectures were pretty startling. He used colour photographs of Lee Miller, his wife-to-be, in the nude, wearing camouflage paint to blend into the grass," says Simpson.

Those images are in the exhibition, so you can put Penrose's claim to the test that "if you could hide such eye-catching attractions as hers from the invading Hun, smaller and less seductive areas of skin would stand an even better chance of becoming invisible."

Training under Penrose in Farnham were the advertising designer Ashley Havinden and landscape artist James McIntosh Patrick.

Havinden's background was in cubism, futurism and Bauhaus typography; his work was celebrated in a show at the Dean Gallery in 2003.

After a stint in the camouflage corps, he was transferred to the Petroleum Warfare Department, where he came up with a system for disguising coastal pumping stations with the help of abandoned holiday cottages on the Dungeness coast.

"Although he was coming from a British modernist approach, he realised you had to apply surrealist techniques," says Simpson. "He disguised these massive concrete installations and pipelines as ruined buildings, shops and pubs.

Dundee-born James McIntosh Patrick was an established landscape artist when he joined the camouflage corps. He drew on his talents as a painter and knowledge of the countryside to devise bases for mobile anti-aircraft guns.

"His knowledge of landscape, countryside and leaves made him ideal for designing camouflage for mobile anti-aircraft guns," says Simpson.

At the Dean Gallery, the wartime work of the three men will be reflected in sketches, notes and photographs. "The three of them came at camouflage from very different angles," says Simpson, who is also displaying work by Ian Hamilton Finlay, who has been influenced by camouflage techniques. "It gives people a good idea of the range of artists involved in this whole area."