

WWII

AMERICA COMES HOME



Alfred Eisenstaedt's famous V-J Day picture from Times Square is perhaps the defining image of American jubilation over the end of World War II. But art from the era is noticeably lacking in triumphalism. ALFRED EISENSTAEDT/TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

# A void in art of war

V-E Day and V-J Day were among the most celebratory and consequential dates in world history, yet few artists seem to have been inspired by them

**Matt Alderton**  
Special to USA TODAY

Photojournalist Alfred Eisenstaedt was in Midtown Manhattan on Aug. 14, 1945, when he captured for Life magazine one of the most iconic images in the history of photography: a young sailor giving a deep, cinematic kiss to a nurse in a crowded and jubilant Times Square.

You've seen the photo. Everyone has. What you've probably never stopped to consider, however, is why it resonates so deeply.

The editors at Time magazine have. In 2016, they included it in their list of the 100 most influential photos of all time. "Eisenstaedt's photograph of that passionate swoop distilled the relief and promise of that momentous day in a single moment of unbridled joy," they wrote.

That "momentous day" was the day Imperial Japan surrendered to Allied forces, thereby ending World War II. The scale of exuberance might have felt unprecedented were it not for the comparable buoyancy felt just three months earlier on May 8, when Nazi Germany also capitulated.

Equal parts sentimental and significant, V-E Day and V-J Day should have been ripe for picking by artists. Or so art history would suggest.

"Going back millennia, if you look at art relating to war, most of it is triumphalist," says London-based curator and





Panels at the National World War II Memorial in Washington depict various aspects of the war, from bloody battles to postwar celebrations. RON EDMONDS/AP

art historian Monica Bohm-Duchen, author of “Art and the Second World War” and founder of Insiders/Outsiders, a yearlong arts festival in the United Kingdom that celebrated refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe and their impact on British culture. “Whether it was in ancient Mesopotamia or Napoleonic France, it was art made for the victors to celebrate victory,” Bohm-Duchen says.

Indeed, victory for the victors is inspirational. And yet, photojournalists like Eisenstaedt notwithstanding, few Western artists were inspired by the Allied victory to make it the subject of lasting art.

“There really are not that many works that I’m aware of that have to do with V-E Day or V-J Day,” notes Bohm-Duchen, who says only Soviet artists embraced the triumphalism that was so common in earlier epochs. Typical of Soviet works, for example, are “Victory!” by Pyotr Krivonogov and “Victory Salute” by Petr Pavlovich Ossovsky. The former depicts elated Soviet soldiers cel-

ebrating after the Red Army seized the Reichstag in Berlin on April 30, 1945. The latter depicts fireworks over Moscow days later on May 9, when the Soviet Union celebrated V-E Day.

Bohm-Duchen says, “The Great Patriotic War, as Russia calls it, was celebrated in Russian art for many decades to come, whereas artists in both Britain and America seemed to sweep it under the carpet as soon as the war was won.”

Decades later, their doing so says as much about the war as their unmade artwork might have.

#### Artists at War

One might assume that art was of trivial concern during World War II. In fact, the opposite was true.

“A lot of people might view art as somehow frivolous — as not centrally important to a subject as serious as war. I would argue to the contrary,” Bohm-Duchen says.

“Art plays a central role in shaping the public’s perception and attitude to war. And I think that was particularly true during the Second World War.”

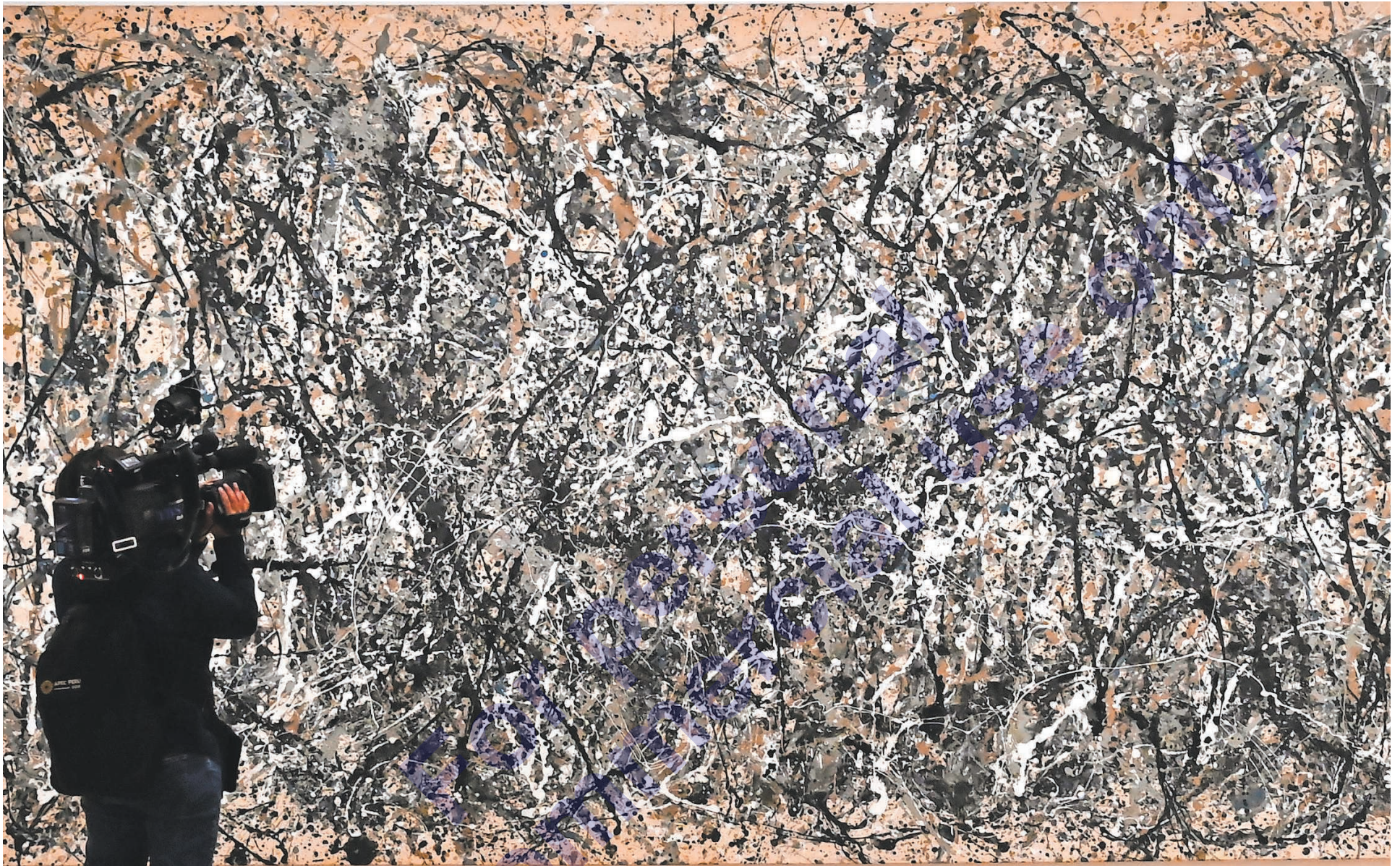
Both the Nazis and the Allies employed art deftly in propaganda and to chronicle the war effort. In the United States, Bohm-Duchen says, drugmaker Abbott Laboratories commissioned civilian artists as art correspondents. So did Life magazine and the U.S. military itself, both of which embedded civilian artists with military units. The British government likewise funded a War Artists Advisory Committee that supported artists traveling with Allied troops.

“In the American context, you even had artist soldiers who were commissioned to record their firsthand experience of combat right there in the thick of it — drawings and such that provided a very, very vivid record of what it was like to actually be fighting,” Bohm-Duchen says.

When Allied soldiers put down their weapons, Allied



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Postwar artists like Jackson Pollock produced abstract works with a sense of anxiety. Above, Pollock's "One: Number 31, 1950." TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

artists put down their brushes. Bohm-Duchen can recall only a handful of works depicting the war's celebratory end—all of them British. They include "VE Day Celebration, 1945" by Eric James Malthouse, whose centerpiece is a civilian lifting her skirt to reveal patriotic panties; "VE Day" by Laurence Stephen Lowry, which captures celebrations in Salford, England; and "VE-Day Celebrations Outside Buckingham Palace" by Leila Faithfull, a triptych depicting throngs of revelers.

### 'The sense of relief,' in bas relief

In the United States, the most prominent non-photographic depiction of the Allies' victory didn't arrive until 2004, when the National World War II Memorial debuted in Washington, D.C.

Designed by architect Friedrich St. Florian, he memorial includes 24 bronze bas relief panels created by

sculptor Ray Kaskey, the last of which depicts V-J Day. In it, a cast of euphoric characters celebrate on a busy streetscape: an elderly man, children waving flags, a couple dancing the jitterbug, another couple kissing atop a mailbox.

"I tried to capture the sense of relief that people must have felt: 'At last, it's over. We won,'" says Kaskey, who conceived his designs using historical photographs, then staged them using World War II re-enactors as models. "Of course, there's so much written about World War II that you can read in libraries and on the internet, but I don't think many people avail themselves of that. Most of us need a visual reminder that connects us with our history in a more dramatic and more immediate way."

Adds Holly Rotondi, executive director of Friends of the National World War II Memorial, "The bas relief panels show the transformation of the United States

from the beginning of the war to the end of the war. ... That moment of joy and celebration on V-J Day is such an important part of that story and what our nation went through."

Although it's conspicuously absent from American art museums today, that joy wasn't entirely lost on contemporaneous artists. Anton Bogdanov, for instance, points to trench art — decorative art made from salvaged wartime objects, like vases, furniture or jewelry made from recycled artillery — and postal covers: art drawn on envelopes and shared through the mail.

"When it comes to artwork specific to commemoration of victory in World War II, there are very few examples in the public consciousness," says Bogdanov, appraiser and senior editor at Everything But The House, an online marketplace that specializes in uncommon items. "The best examples that we see are in smaller, less formal formats."





Kate Rothko Prizel with some of the works by her father, Mark Rothko. Abstract expressionism took hold in a world weary from years of war. JOHANNES SIMON/GETTY IMAGES

Bogdanov highlights two postal covers in particular: One, by cartoonist Cairo Sturgill, shows a lone soldier exclaiming, “Home!” Another, by cachet artist Dorothy Knapp, shows a woman waving a laurel wreath atop a globe surrounded by American, British, Soviet and other Allied flags; beside her, a bald eagle carries a banner in its beak reading “V-E’ Day: Allied Victory in Europe.” Both are postmarked May 8, 1945.

“V-E Day and V-J Day were popular subjects for this medium because it was an easy, affordable keepsake that you could share with friends and family,” Bogdanov says. “Showing your feelings of remembrance and unity with the Allied powers was as easy as going to your local post office.”

#### ‘Ecstasy and anxiety’

If you’re wondering why mainstream commercial artists didn’t share the same enthusiasm for celebra-

tory subject matter, consider the New York-based art movement that immediately followed World War II: Abstract Expressionism. The giants of the form included Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko — known for their drip and color field paintings, respectively.

“If you look at Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollock, you don’t immediately think, ‘This is a nation that’s just emerged victorious from war.’ If anything, there’s an uncertainty. They don’t provide answers; instead, everyone is allowed to define the work for themselves,” says art enthusiast Rachelle Friedman, a history teacher at Lycée Français de New York, a bilingual private school on New York’s Upper East Side.

“Art historians like to talk about art as expressing both ecstasy and anxiety, and I think that’s true after World War II ... You’re moving to the suburbs and having babies, but you’re also worried that the Soviets are going to nuke us,” Friedman says.

Along with anxiety about the future, there was trauma

from the past, according to Kate Gordon, director of London Art Studies, a London-based website that provides online art classes for amateur art lovers. “Advances in technology brought home in a far more immediate way the price of war,” she says. “The advent of photography, cinema and radio meant that the cost to human life was much more visible and much more relatable. “And because of that, I think artists were reluctant to celebrate victory in the same way.”

Bohm-Duchen agrees. In “VE Day Celebration, 1945,” the aforementioned painting by Eric James Malthouse, she notes the presence of a wounded veteran behind the celebratory civilian lifting up her skirt.

“Yes, we won. But at what cost?” she says. “You’ve got V-E Day, but you’ve also got the knowledge of concentration camps. You’ve got V-J Day, but you’ve also got the knowledge of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war was over, but you couldn’t have a wholehearted celebration. You simply couldn’t.”