

Masters of disguise

Art and popular culture rushed to adopt the lines and colours of military camouflage - ironically, this was because the patterns were so noticeable, writes **Tim Newark**

• Aft When Pablo Picasso saw a
• IA m camouflaged piece of
artillery in a Paris street
war during the first world
war, he exclaimed "C'est
nous qui avons fait ça!" ("We created
that!"). But how true was his assertion?
Did cubism really inspire the dazzling
disruptive patterns of military camou-
flage used throughout the 20th cen-
tury?

It was the invention of aircraft that led directly to the birth of modern camou-
flage. The earliest aircraft used in the first world war were deployed for aerial reconnaissance. Their task was to spot enemy positions and note the artillery, soldiers and vehicles gathered there. With this information, they could direct artillery fire at these targets. This process led to a deadly game of hide-and-seek in which each side tried to disguise any build-up of artillery and soldiers, as it would indicate the beginning of an offensive. Camouflage took a lead role in this combat of deception.

Initially, camouflage took the form of either painting big guns or covering them with painted tarpaulins or netting. The French were the first to establish a camouflage corps but were soon followed by the British.

The colours chosen initially were green or brown, to allow weapons to merge with muddy backgrounds, but it was quickly found that black or dark colours painted next to lighter colours would break up the shape of guns and other equipment when seen from above - this is called disruptive pattern. It liberated camouflage artists and they used bright yellow, red and blue paint in their decorative schemes.

The development of military camou-
flage inspired a series of dazzling con-
temporary paintings by leading artists. Some of these can be seen at the exhibition on the history of camouflage that opens at the Imperial War Museum in London next week. It includes paintings by C.R.W. Nevinson and Leon Underwood, both avant-garde

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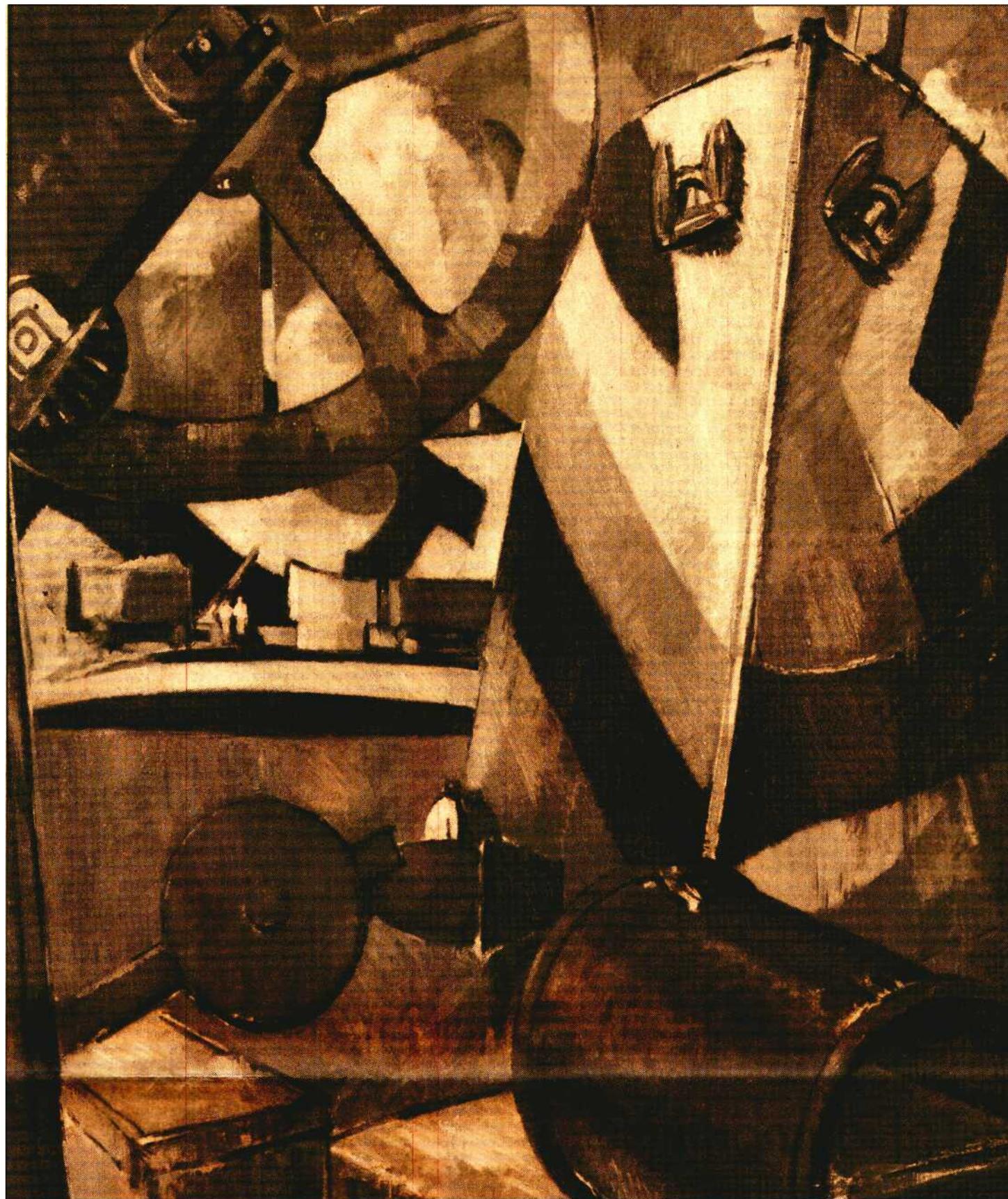
artists before the war, Nevinson a key figure in English futurism.

It was the use of bold lines and contrasting planes of colour to break up the realistic appearance of an object that excited both cubists and camoufleurs. US author Gertrude Stein, who lived in Paris during the war, was close friends with Picasso and agreed with the artist's comment on camouflage, saying "From Cezanne through him they had come to that."

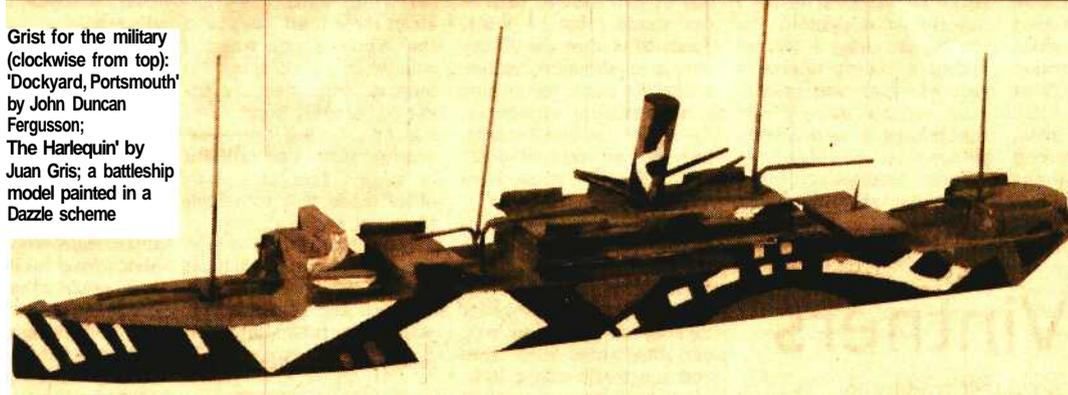
But though there may have been stylistic parallels, it did not necessarily mean that military camouflage was directly inspired by cubism itself. Picasso was not very interested in the war and had little to do with it; fellow cubist Georges Braque, however, became an infantry officer and was almost killed in 1915 by shrapnel wounds to his head and was later awarded the Legion d'honneur and Croix de guerre.

Long after the war, Braque also claimed some affinity with camouflage: "Cubism and camouflage," I once said to someone. He answered that it was all coincidence. 'No, no,' I said, 'it is you who are wrong. Before cubism we had impressionism, and the army used pale-blue uniforms, horizon blue, atmospheric camouflage.'"

Roland Penrose, artist and camou-
fleur in the second world war, told a story in his biography of Picasso about the-cubist having a conversation with the poet and artist Jean Cocteau about military camouflage. "If they want to make an army invisible at a distance," said Picasso, "they have only to dress their men as harlequins." At first, a seemingly ridiculous idea, Penrose understood immediately what Picasso



Grist for the military
(clockwise from top):
'Dockyard, Portsmouth'
by John Duncan
Fergusson;
'The Harlequin' by
Juan Gris; a battleship
model painted in a
Dazzle scheme



meant. "Harlequin, cubism and military camouflage had joined hands," Penrose concluded. "The point they had in common was the disruption of their exterior form in a desire to change their too easily recognised identity."

Despite the similarities between the styles of cubism and camouflage, there is certainly no obvious link between the movement's protagonists, Picasso and Braque, and the painting of military schemes. There was, however, close involvement between other

avant-garde artists in Paris and military camouflage, particularly because chief camoufleur Lucien-Victor Guirand de Scevola made a point of employing artists associated with cubism to paint artillery. "In order to deform totally the aspect of the object," he later wrote, "I had to employ the means that cubists used to represent it." Cubist painter Jacques Villon - brother of sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon and Marcel Duchamp - served as an artist in the camouflage section of the French army.

Andre Mare was involved with the Duchamp-Villon circle through his work on the Maison Cubiste in 1912. He began his career as an artist but turned to avant-garde interior design from 1905 onwards. In the war, Mare was a senior figure in the French camouflage corps and a valued adviser to British camoufleurs. He was clearly aware of cubist ideas and made exquisite sketches of his wartime work that show a direct link between the art movement and military camouflage. These culminate in a double-page

watercolour sketch in his notebook of 1917 showing a camouflaged 28cm gun. It is a brilliant piece of cubist-style art with accentuated lines and planes combined with an accurate rendering of an artillery camouflage scheme. It is, in effect, the smoking gun linking cubism and camouflage.

The most famous strand of camou-
flage in the first world war was Dazzle - an angular, strident version of disruptive pattern used to disguise merchant ships, which seems as if it must have been inspired by modernist art. But

Dazzle was the brainchild of Lieuten-
ant Commander Norman Wilkinson - a traditional marine artist. He later explained the concept in a speech he gave in 1919.

"The primary object of this scheme," said Wilkinson, "was not so much to cause the enemy to miss his shot when actually in firing position, but to mislead him, when the ship was first sighted, as to the correct position to take up." Dazzle was a "method to produce an effect by paint in such a way that all accepted forms of a ship are broken up by masses of strongly contrasted colour, consequently making it a matter of difficulty for a submarine to decide on the exact course of the vessel to be attacked."

Its main aim was to upset the target-
ing of submarine commanders and there is some evidence that it worked. Trial schemes must have succeeded as, by October 1917, the British Admiralty had decided to paint all its merchant ships in Dazzle patterns. All patterns were different and were first tested on little wooden models seen through a periscope in a studio. Many of the model designs were painted by women artists working in the Royal Academy of Arts in London. A foreman then scaled up their designs for the real thing. "The colours mostly in use," said Wilkinson, "were black, white, blue and green... When making-a design for a vessel, vertical lines were largely avoided. Sloping lines, curves and stripes are by far the best and give the greater distortion."

Many modernist artists were inspired by the sight of these ships and created paintings of them. Four months after the end of the first world war, London's Chelsea Arts Club resumed its famous themed balls and the first took the inspiration of wartime camouflage. It was held in the ballroom of the Royal Albert Hall on the evening of March 12 1919 and is the first evidence of camou-
flage style being taken up by popular culture. A journalist was struck by the strange Dazzle costumes at the ball,

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signifying a new age of freer expres-
sion. "To the strains of the Jazz band these amazing revellers, vanishing and reappearing, seemed to set at naught the world of the past," he wrote in The Times. "They hailed a new world, swifter, gayer, more adventurous."

Camouflage was quickly adopted as the dress of counterculture. The Illustrated London News devoted a picture spread to the Dazzle Ball and showed a sketch of some of the camouflage-inspired costumes, among them people dressed as harlequin clowns - a favourite cubist theme.

Although there was a link between modernist art and the creation of military camouflage, through the military involvement of artists such as Andre Mare, it was camouflage that left its mark on postwar art rather than the other way round. Many modernist artists were inspired by the appearance of camouflage weapons and their disruptive patterns to produce some striking paintings, and camouflage has continued to feature in cutting-edge art, design and fashion ever since.

The 'Camouflage' exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, London, opens on March 23 (www.iwm.org.uk). 'Camouflage', by Tim Newark with an introduction by Jonathan Miller, is published by Thames & Hudson

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