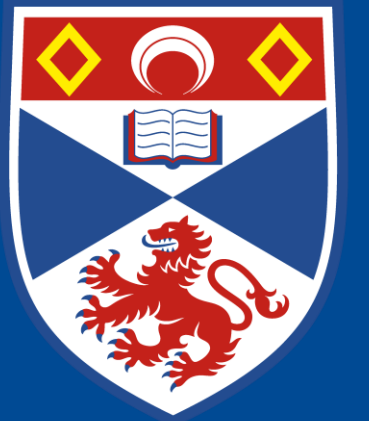


Art, Industry and War in the Work of Josef Heu

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Introduction

- In December 1917, the Austro-Hungarian war artist and sculptor Josef Heu (1876-1952) travelled to occupied Romania.
- He created thirteen watercolours and sketches, mostly depicting **destroyed oil infrastructure** in Romania's resource-rich Wallachia region.
- Through his use of vibrant colour and landscape, Heu encoded these industrial scenes with both **political understanding** and his **personal artistic values**.
- The works provide insight into artistic production during the First World War and illuminate Heu as an underexplored artist.

Methodology

To understand the **visual features** of the works and their **broader significance**, I used:

- close visual analysis of individual watercolours
- a historical discussion of Romania's oil industry during the Central Powers' occupation (1916-1918)
- a wider look at Heu's life using materials from the Heu family archive
- the provenance of the works – their possession by physician Stefan Jellinek during the War

Context: Wartime Romania



- Romania was neutral for the first two years of the war but entered on the Entente's side in August 1916.
- Even with Russia's help, the Romanian army struggled against the German and Austro-Hungarian forces. Soon two-thirds of Romania were taken.
- In November 1916, just before the occupation, **the Romanians deliberately destroyed their oil industry to prevent enemy exploitation**.¹
- The Central Powers then repaired the sites. Heu painted them a year into the restoration efforts.



Figure 3. Josef Heu, *View of destroyed engine house in Moreni*. 1917. Gouache painting. Private collection.

Questions to Drive Interpretation

Consider the puzzling qualities of this painting from the set, alongside a photograph of the destruction to the oil sites.



Figure 1. Josef Heu, *View of burnt oil boilers in Florești*. 1917. Gouache painting. Private collection.



Figure 2. Fire at oil refineries. Buzău, 1916. Source: Imperial War Museums, IWM (Q 76072).



Why does Heu focus so much on the landscape, if the subject is industry?



Why is the work so brightly coloured for a wartime scene?



Why does the destruction alluded to in the inscription seem picturesque?

Interpretation 1: Reflecting economic value

- The oil and other raw materials taken from Romania were **immensely valuable** because they allowed Germany and Austria-Hungary to continue the war into 1918.²
- Military authorities often saw their territories as **"treasure chests"**.³
- The bright colouring in the watercolours mirrors the **sense of promise** around the oil. Similarly, the open landscape conveys the **availability of Romania's natural abundance**.

Interpretation 2: Reflecting an artistic vision

These watercolours also **embody a set of values** for Heu as an artist.

- He viewed art as creating a **"peaceful world of [his] own"**, accounting for the diminished evidence of either destruction to the oil sites or industrial activity.⁴
- Heu understood art as **"immortalising the forms of nature"**. This emerges in his choice to emphasise the land and sky.⁵

Interpretation 3: Artistic refuge

Landscape was a common way for war artists to **process the horror and instability of war**. It was also an important response to upheaval for Heu across his life, not just during the war years.⁶

Early life

During childhood, Heu would have to hide in the woods from his violence-prone stepfather. **He cherished the beautiful landscape** of his youth as a sanctuary from danger.

Later life

Just before the Second World War, **Heu's life was uprooted again**, when his wife's Jewish heritage forced their family out of Austria. Heu painted Yorkshire where he settled, the landscape of his exile, until his death in 1952.

Further Context: On the margins of science

- These watercolours ended up in a **special war collection** belonging to the pioneer of electropathology, Stefan Jellinek (1871-1968).
- Heu collaborated with Jellinek during the First World War. **Through art, he promoted Jellinek's scientific research** into the harmful effects of electricity on the body.
- The War scaled up electricity use, bringing fresh interest to Jellinek's field. This prompted him to create the Electrohygienic War Collection.⁷
- By being in the collection, **Heu's December 1917 watercolours celebrate the wartime developments of electropathology and Jellinek as a scientist**.

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Reflections

Heu's December 1917 watercolours:

- were a distinct way of imagining industry during wartime**. They reflect both the Central Powers' broad opportunistic view of Romania and Heu's values as an individual artist.
- were part of a collective effort to make sense of destruction** caused by the First World War. Heu's techniques of landscape and bright colour were also a **deeply personal approach**.
- show how artworks can build up various layers of meaning**. As well as having their own significance, the watercolours indirectly contributed to solidifying Jellinek's scientific identity.

References

¹ Pieter M. Judson and Tara Zahra, "The Fortunes of War: Occupation Regimes," in *The Great War and the Transformation of Habsburg Central Europe*, ed. Pieter M. Judson and Tara Zahra (Oxford University Press, 2025), 61.
² Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), 265.
³ Judson and Zahra, "The Fortunes of War," 62-63.

⁴ Josef Heu, [Autobiographical manuscript], unpublished manuscript, Heu family private archive, 7.

⁵ Heu, [Autobiographical manuscript], 11.

⁶ Heu, [Autobiographical manuscript].

⁷ Helmut Lackner, "Stefan Jellinek, Franz Maresch," in *Achtung Strom: Stefan Jellinek und das Elektropathologische Museum* (Naturhistorisches Museum Wien, Technisches Museum Wien, 2013), 27.



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