

Paper Mache for 8-14-26 by David Read

When Art Saves Lives. Sometimes we all may have the tendency to think of the arts as something extra, a pleasant diversion to be enjoyed after more important endeavors are finished. We attend concerts after work, visit museums on vacation, or see a play on the weekend. But history tells a very different story. Repeatedly, in humanity's darkest moments, art has not been a luxury. It has been a lifeline.

One of the most extraordinary examples that I just learned about thanks to my music educator son is the story told in the documentary film, *Defiant Requiem*. During World War II, prisoners in the Nazi concentration camp at Terezín secretly rehearsed and performed Giuseppe Verdi's *Requiem*. Imagine standing in a camp surrounded by hunger, disease, and death, then singing one of the most powerful choral works ever written. They weren't merely performing a concert. They were proclaiming that the human spirit could not be imprisoned. Every performance became an act of courage and resistance. The music reminded both performers and listeners that they remained human, even when others sought to strip away their dignity. Once discovered, the prisoners were required to perform the *Requiem* for visiting Nazi SS officers from Berlin and International Red Cross workers to mask the atrocities that lay within. The same resilience emerged closer to home during the incarceration of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. At camps throughout the West, including the Arboga Assembly Center here in Yuba County, families created beauty from almost nothing. Artists carved birds and flowers from scraps of wood, fashioned jewelry from shells, painted landscapes behind barbed wire, and organized concerts, theatrical performances, and art classes. Children continued to draw and paint. Adults continued to create. These works were not simply hobbies to pass the time. They were declarations that identity, culture, and hope could survive even in confinement. Many of these pieces remain deeply moving today because they remind us that creativity often flourishes in adversity. When people lose control over almost everything else, they still possess the ability to imagine, to create, and to share their stories.

The healing power of the arts also reached American service members overseas. During World War II, Korea, and especially the Vietnam War, entertainers traveled thousands of miles to perform for troops far from home. No one embodied that tradition more than Bob Hope and the USO tours, the TV broadcasts of which I grew up watching. For a few precious hours, soldiers laughed, sang along, and remembered the lives they had left behind. Those performances did not end wars or erase hardship, but they restored morale and reminded young men and women that they had not been forgotten. These stories reveal a profound truth. The arts cannot prevent suffering, but they can help people endure it. A concert can rekindle hope. A painting can preserve memory. A play can restore laughter. A poem can remind someone they are not alone. Perhaps that is why societies throughout history have always returned to music, dance, storytelling, and visual art during and after tragedy. They help us make sense of what seems senseless. They connect us to one another when fear and isolation threaten to divide us.

The next time someone asks whether the arts really matter, remember the prisoners who sang Verdi behind barbed wire, the Japanese American families who carved beauty from scraps of wood in incarceration camps, and the weary soldiers who found comfort in Bob Hope's

troupe's performances thousands of miles from home. Sometimes art entertains us. Sometimes it educates us. And sometimes, in ways both quiet and profound, it saves lives.