

# World War II as Inspiration for Digital Illustration

Aziz Abdurrahman Ash-Shiddiq<sup>1)\*</sup>, Arif Fiyanto<sup>2)</sup>

<sup>1,2)</sup> Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author

Email : [aziz.abdurrahman.13@gmail.com](mailto:aziz.abdurrahman.13@gmail.com)

**How to cite:** Ash-Shiddiq, A. A & Fiyanto, A. (2025). World War II as Inspiration for Digital Illustration. *Gorga : Jurnal Seni Rupa*, 14 (2), 679-686. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24114/gr.v14i2.68502>

**Article History :** Received: Agustus 18, 2025. Revised: October 14, 2025. Accepted: December 31, 2025

## ABSTRACT

World War II (1939-1945) was one of the most influential events of the twentieth century, leaving enduring impacts on global politics, society, and culture. Beyond its devastation, the war has inspired artistic responses that attempt to convey both its trauma and its lessons. Among contemporary practices, digital illustration provides unique opportunities to reconstruct and reinterpret the past through flexible use of visual elements such as color, texture, composition, and atmosphere. This article explores semi-realistic digital painting techniques to represent two pivotal moments of World War II: the German invasion of Poland in 1939, which marked the beginning of the conflict, and Germany's defeat in Berlin in 1945, which signaled its end in Europe. The creative process followed three stages: (1) historical analysis and concept design, (2) digital production, and (3) presentation to the audience. Historical references, including photographs, military symbols, and battlefield conditions, were utilized to maintain narrative accuracy while still allowing for artistic expression and symbolism. The two works are presented as a visual narrative that traces the war's trajectory, from its dark outbreak to its symbolic conclusion. By employing contrasting tones, dynamic compositions, and evocative perspectives, the illustrations aim to evoke emotion, encourage reflection, and contribute to the preservation of collective memory. Ultimately, this study highlights the potential of digital illustration not only as a contemporary creative practice but also as a valuable medium for history education, cultural preservation, and interdisciplinary discourse.

## KEYWORDS

Digital Illustration  
World War II  
Historical Illustration  
Historical Preservation

This is an open access  
article under the CC-  
BY-SA license



## INTRODUCTION

World War II (1939–1945) was one of the largest and most influential historical events of the 20th century. This global conflict not only left behind massive physical destruction and countless casualties but also had profound social, political, and cultural impacts across different parts of the world (Nawaz, 2025). Due to its intensity and complexity, World War II has continued to serve as a source of inspiration explored through various art forms, ranging from painting, sculpture, and film to literary works (Moreshead, 2023). Through art, the experience of war is not merely documented but also transformed into a critical reflection on humanity, suffering, and hope that emerged amidst the tragedy (Mešková & Höhn, 2020).

Entering the modern era, the development of digital technology has introduced a new medium in the practice of fine arts, particularly in visual art. Digital painting and software-based illustration provide artists with the freedom to experiment with color, texture, composition, and lighting without the material limitations of traditional media (Srivastava, 2019). This aligns with the growing role of digital media as the primary visual language of contemporary society (Muttuqin et al., 2024). Consequently, digital visual art not only serves as a space for creative expression but also opens new possibilities for conveying historical narratives through approaches that are more interactive and relevant to today's audiences (Ayuningtyas & Sari, 2024).

In the context of depicting historical events, digital illustration holds an important role as both a medium of reconstruction and reinterpretation (Soto-Martin et al., 2020). Through flexible visual manipulation, artists can re-present historical events, such as World War II, with stronger emotional nuances without neglecting factual accuracy (Lloyd, 2020). The integration of archival sources such as documentary photographs, military records, and cultural symbols with artistic freedom enables the creation of works that remain faithful to history while still conveying symbolic messages (KEILBACH, 2009; Sudana et al., 2024). Thus, digital illustration functions not only as a visual representation but also as a reflective medium that bridges collective memory and contemporary interpretation (Zakharchenko & Shchedrina, 2023).

Nevertheless, several challenges have made the exploration of history-themed digital illustration relatively rare. First, most artistic representations of World War II remain tied to traditional media such as painting or documentary photography, leaving limited space for digital approaches (Horichko, 2023). Second, previous studies generally emphasize only one side of the events, without comparing crucial moments at the beginning and the end of the war as two interconnected symbolic poles. Third, the integration between historical archival studies and digital illustration techniques has not been widely developed, even though such opportunities are crucial for producing works that are both accurate and reflective (Marra et al., 2021). This condition highlights the urgency of creating new works that can fill this research gap (Anggakarti et al., 2024).

This project emphasizes the exploration of semi-realistic digital painting techniques as a medium for representing historical events. The novelty of this research lies in the use of a visual diptych approach that juxtaposes two pivotal moments of World War II: Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 and the fall of Berlin in 1945. By placing these two events in visual dialogue, the study not only presents a sharp contrast between the beginning and the end of the war but also offers a cyclical narrative of destruction and resolution. The methodological approach, which combines archival research with digital painting experimentation, is expected to produce works that are both historically grounded and critically reflective, while also enriching the discourse on digital art as a medium for historical education and the preservation of cultural memory.

## METHOD

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach with an art creation method. The creative process is carried out through three main stages, namely:

### 1. Pre-Creation

At this stage, data were collected in the form of literature, digital archives, documentary photographs, and historical records related to World War II. References were selected purposively in accordance with the aesthetic and narrative needs of the work. In addition, an initial concept was developed in the form of idea sketches and mood explorations to determine the visual direction.

### 2. Creation

This process involved the production of digital illustrations using a semi-realistic approach with digital painting software. The main phases included digital sketching, grayscale value determination, coloring, and the addition of visual elements that support the narrative atmosphere.

### 3. Post-Creation

The final stage consisted of refining the work through technical and artistic evaluation, covering composition, color, lighting, and the coherence of the visual narrative. The completed artworks were then published digitally to obtain audience feedback as well as to serve as a means of disseminating the research outcomes.

Through these stages, the research focuses on how semi-realistic digital painting techniques are employed to represent significant events of World War II, as well as how the resulting works can be analyzed visually, emotionally, and narratively.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

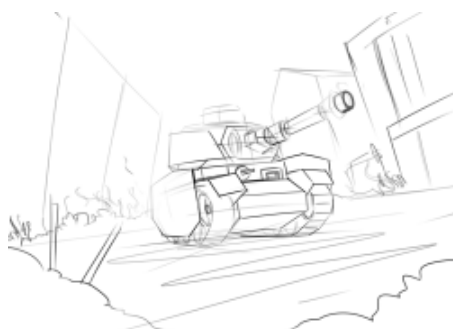
The results of this work are in line with (Gillette, 2023), who emphasizes the potential of digital painting in creating dramatic atmospheres through the interplay of light, color, and texture. In terms of historical reconstruction, (KEILBACH, 2009; Rahmat, 2021) highlights the limitations of

documentary photography, which is often regarded as objective but does not always succeed in conveying the emotional nuances of an event. Digital illustration, as demonstrated in this work, bridges this gap by presenting emotion while maintaining historical accuracy. (Lloyd, 2020) also notes how contemporary visual media, such as graphic novels, play a role in shaping war memory in Germany, proving that visual art contributes significantly to historiography. Similarly, (Zakharchenko & Shchedrina, 2023) assert that collective memory today is largely preserved through digital media, making history-themed digital artworks increasingly relevant in the modern era.

While previous studies, such as (Horichko, 2023), have tended to rely on traditional media, this research offers novelty by presenting significant events of World War II through the medium of semi-realistic digital painting. The contribution of this study lies in the exploration of digital illustration techniques that not only produce artistic works but also serve as a means of historical preservation in support of history education.

### 1. Digital Sketch

The process begins with creating a digital sketch using a pen tablet as the basic framework. This sketch serves as the initial blueprint that outlines the overall composition, perspective, and placement of the main objects, while also establishing the structural flow of the artwork. At this stage, the lines are intentionally kept simple and flexible, allowing for modifications and adjustments as needed. Such flexibility is important as it provides the artist with space to experiment with proportions, spatial relationships, and visual balance before progressing into the detailing stage (Muslim et al., 2024).



**Figure 1.** Sketch (Source: Author's Documentation, 2025)

### 2. Grayscale Rendering (Value Adjustment)

The next stage involves grayscale rendering, a process used to establish the arrangement of lighting, shadows, and spatial depth before the application of color. By working in grayscale, the artist is able to focus primarily on the tonal structure, which is essential for achieving visual balance and coherence. This stage also plays a crucial role in shaping the intended atmosphere, ensuring that the mood and depth of the composition effectively align with the narrative being conveyed.



**Figure 2.** Rendering Grayscale (Source: Author's Documentation, 2025)

### 3. Coloring

The next step is the application of base colors as the foundation of the color scheme, followed by detailed coloring. The choice of colors is determined by the atmosphere and emotional tone to be conveyed, for example, warm tones to depict fire or destruction, and cool tones to evoke a somber

mood. The coloring process is carried out in layers, beginning with the application of base colors to the main objects, then adding gradations, textures, and saturation adjustments to create visual harmony that reinforces the narrative and symbolic meaning of the artwork (Miswar et al., 2022; Zahra & Mansoor, 2024).

#### 4. Addition of Visual Effects

Visual effects were added to enhance the atmosphere of the work while providing layers of realism and dramatization. Elements such as fire, smoke, dust, and light reflections on metal surfaces were integrated using layer blending modes in Adobe Photoshop, ensuring a harmonious composition. Beyond mere ornamentation, these effects serve to reinforce the emotional tone and visual narrative, allowing the audience to sense the tension and symbolic meaning of the scene.

#### 5. Finishing

The final stage is finishing, a process of refining the artwork to ensure consistency with the intended narrative and atmosphere. This includes adjusting contrast, details, colors, and lighting, along with minor corrections to textures or edges. Color grading is also applied to unify the overall tone, resulting in a cohesive and visually compelling illustration ready for presentation (Xue et al., 2024).

In addition to the finishing process, the post-creation stage also involves a systematic visual and technical evaluation of the artwork. This evaluation is conducted qualitatively and descriptively with the aim of assessing several key aspects: the accuracy and balance of the composition, the harmony of colors, the consistency and realism of lighting, and the overall strength of the visual narrative that has been constructed. The analysis is guided by established principles of fine art and composition theory, ensuring that the artwork not only meets technical standards but also effectively conveys the intended message of the artist. To broaden reach and interaction, the completed illustrations were digitally published through the author's Instagram account, serving both as a public launch and a platform for engaging with the audience. This step underscores the role of social media as an accessible medium for contemporary artists to share their work, receive feedback, and foster dialogue, transforming the creative process into an interactive exchange between the creator and the viewer.



**Figure 3.** Final Work (Source: Author's Documentation, 2025)

The result of this design consists of two digital illustration works representing key moments in World War II: the German invasion of Poland as the beginning of the war, and Germany's defeat in Berlin as the conclusion and end of the global conflict. These two works are presented as visuals that not only reconstruct historical events but also interpret their emotional dimensions, allowing the audience to experience the fear, destruction, and relief that marked the course of the war. Through the application of semi-realistic digital painting techniques, the first illustration conveys an atmosphere of darkness, domination, and devastation, while the second piece presents a contrasting mood, symbolizing the collapse of power and transition through the use of warm colors and a brighter sky. Beyond their aesthetic value, these works also have the potential to be developed as exhibition materials, educational media for history learning, or as part of a visual portfolio demonstrating how contemporary digital art can bridge archival accuracy with expressive symbolism. To further explain



the visual form, symbolic elements, and intended atmosphere, descriptive narratives and analyses of each work are presented in the following section.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Work



**Figure 4.** The Fall of Peace (Source: Author's Documentation, 2025)

Title : The Fall of Peace  
Size : 42 cm x 59,4 cm  
Media : Digital  
Year : 2025

### Description

The first work depicts the dramatic moment of the German invasion of Poland in 1939, an event that marked the beginning of World War II and paved the way for an unprecedented global conflict. The main subject of this composition is a German tank, portrayed from a low-angle perspective to emphasize military dominance, intimidation, and extraordinary power. Surrounding the central figure, the background shows city buildings reduced to rubble and engulfed in flames, reinforcing the atmosphere of destruction and chaos brought by the invasion of Poland. A dark and muted color palette dominated by shades of brown, gray, and fiery red was deliberately chosen to create a gloomy and oppressive atmosphere. Through the application of semi-realistic digital painting techniques, the artist ensures that the details of the tank and its environment remain true to reality, while still incorporating expressive qualities and dramatization that enhance the visual impact of the work.



**Figure 5.** Panzer iv (Source: [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com))



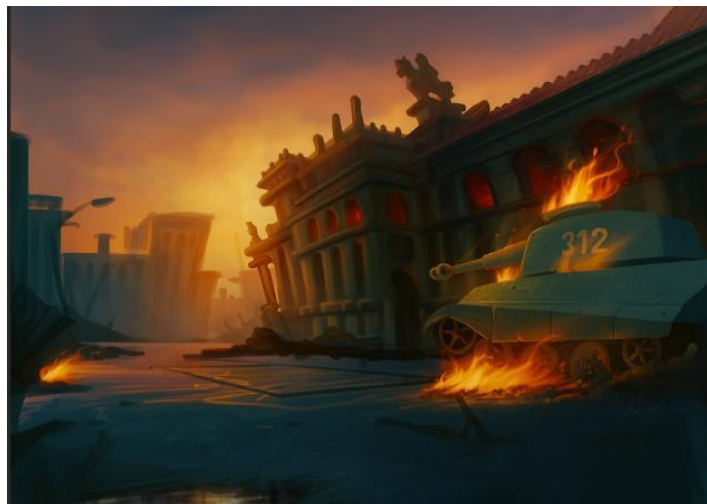
**Figure 6.** The Destruction of Poland's City  
(Source: [www.holocaustencyclopedia.com](http://www.holocaustencyclopedia.com))

### Analysis

Symbolically, the German tank in this work appears not merely as a war machine, but as a representation of the aggressive and destructive power that devastated Poland at the outset of World War II. The low-angle perspective reinforces the psychological impression of Germany as a towering "giant," instilling fear and helplessness in anyone under its control. The dominance of dark and muted

colors reflects the grimness of the moment, as if signaling that the invasion had plunged Europe into a period of darkness and uncertainty. The presence of burning buildings adds a symbolic layer, emphasizing not only physical destruction but also human suffering and the inevitable loss of cultural values caused by the war. By combining historical references with symbolic choices, this work serves a dual purpose: as a reconstruction of a significant historical event and as a visual expression of the emotional burden left by the horrors at the beginning of the war.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Work



**Figure 7.** The Fall of Berlin (Source: Author's Documentation, 2025)

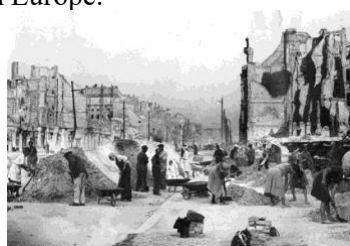
Title : The Fall of Berlin  
Size : 42 cm x 59,4 cm  
Media : Digital  
Year : 2025

## Description

The second work represents the moment of Germany's defeat by the Soviet Union in Berlin in 1945, an event that not only marked the collapse of Nazi power but also signaled the official end of World War II in Europe. The focal point of the composition is a German Tiger II tank with the number "312," depicted in a destroyed and burning state, symbolizing the downfall of the once-feared German war machine. This powerful object is prominently placed in the foreground, against the backdrop of Berlin's cityscape reduced to rubble, where monumental buildings lie in ruins. The deliberate placement of these elements emphasizes the contrast between the symbol of past power and its tragic collapse. Above the devastation, a warm, glowing sky with gradients of orange, yellow, and pink stretches across the background, creating a visual counterpoint to the destruction below. This color scheme was intentionally chosen to convey a sense of transition, suggesting that a long period of violence and destruction is gradually giving way to the possibility of peace and renewal. The composition is carefully arranged, with the tank positioned in the front-right to draw primary attention, while the ruined architecture of Berlin rises in the distance as silent witnesses to the fall of German military power and the conclusion of the war in Europe.



**Figure 8.** Tiger II (Source: [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com))



**Figure 9.** The Ruin of Berlin

## Analysis

The main symbolism in this work lies in the depiction of the burning Tiger II tank, serving as a powerful representation of the destruction of the German war machine and, more broadly, the collapse of the militaristic ideology that had fueled years of conflict. The tank, once a symbol of strength and intimidation, is now shown in ruins, embodying the inevitable downfall of aggression and tyranny. Behind it, the crumbling buildings of Berlin reinforce this message, acting as a visual metaphor for the collapse of Nazi domination in Europe and the devastation it left behind. Unlike the first work, which is dominated by dark and muted tones to convey the grimness of the war's outset, this illustration presents a markedly different atmosphere through the use of warm colors in the sky. Gradients of orange, yellow, and pink are deliberately employed to evoke a sense of transition, as if signaling that the long and brutal war that brought destruction and despair has finally ended, and the world stands on the threshold of a brighter new chapter. The remnants of fire still visible in parts of the scene remind viewers that peace arises from the ashes of destruction, emphasizing that the war's end came not without loss, but through a costly victory. Yet, the luminous sky above carries a deeper meaning: a symbol of hope, optimism, and the possibility of rebirth, inviting reflection on resilience and the process of rebuilding society after one of the darkest periods in human history.

## CONCLUSION

Digital illustrations with a semi-realistic approach serve as a powerful medium for reconstructing and reinterpreting pivotal moments of World War II, bridging historical accuracy with artistic expression. Through the contrasting works *The Fall of Peace* (1939) and *The Fall of Berlin* (1945), this project not only captures the stark transition from the war's grim beginnings to its hopeful conclusion but also underscores the emotional and symbolic dimensions of these events. By employing dynamic compositions, contrasting color palettes, and dramatic perspectives, the illustrations evoke deep emotional responses, encouraging viewers to reflect on the moral and cultural lessons of the conflict. Furthermore, this study highlights the potential of digital art as an interdisciplinary tool, enriching history education, preserving collective memory, and fostering public engagement with the past. As digital media continues to evolve, such creative approaches offer innovative ways to visualize history, ensuring its relevance for contemporary and future generations.

## REFERENCES

- Anggakarti, D. M., Astuti, M., & Benyamin, M. F. (2024). Transformasi Adaptasi Penciptaan Seni Mozaik Sekuensial (Studi Kasus Hikayat Legenda Sangkuriang). *Gorga : Jurnal Seni Rupa*, 13(1), 381–387. <https://doi.org/10.24114/gr.v13i01.52869>
- Ayuningtyas, N. L., & Sari, N. (2024). Student Creation Process in Making Basic Two-Dimensional Art and Design Assignments by Digital Methods. *Gorga : Jurnal Seni Rupa*, 13(2), 426–435. <https://doi.org/10.24114/gr.v13i2.61119>
- Gillette, J. (2023). *Digital Painting and Rendering for Theatrical Design*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003212836>
- Horichko, Y. (2023). Features of the Graphic Representation of Military Life During the First and Second World Wars and in the Interwar Period. *Scientific Journal of Polonia University*, 58(3), 243–250. <https://doi.org/10.23856/5834>
- KEILBACH, J. (2009). Photographs, Symbolic Images, and the Holocaust: on the (Im)Possibility of Depicting Historical Truth. *History and Theory*, 48(2), 54–76. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2009.00498.x>
- Lloyd, A. (2020). *Emotional History and Legacies of War in Recent German Comics and Graphic Novels* (pp. 49–67). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37998-8\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37998-8_3)
- Marra, A., Gerbino, S., Greco, A., & Fabbrocino, G. (2021). Combining Integrated Informative System and Historical Digital Twin for Maintenance and Preservation of Artistic Assets. *Sensors*, 21(17), 5956. <https://doi.org/10.3390/s21175956>
- Mešková, L., & Höhn, E. (2020). The Memory of the World War II in the Contemporary Art of

- Austria: The Political Voice of Art. *Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art*, 10, 618–623. <https://doi.org/10.18688/aa200-4-56>
- Miswar, M., Rian, R., Muler, Y., & Rajudin, R. (2022). STUDI WARNA DAN GAYA PADA KARYA YAZID. *Gorga : Jurnal Seni Rupa*, 11(2), 370. <https://doi.org/10.24114/gr.v11i2.38384>
- Moreshead, A. (2023). 1960: When Art and Literature Confronted the Memory of World War II and Remade the Modern by Al Filreis. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 69(1), 176–178. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2023.0011>
- Muslim, M., Diningrat, R. B. S. N., & Islami, D. (2024). Pengembangan Pembelajaran Demonstrasi Terbimbing Dengan Strategi Diferensiasi Pada Mata Kuliah Menggambar Sketsa. *Gorga : Jurnal Seni Rupa*, 13(01), 178. <https://doi.org/10.24114/gr.v13i01.49417>
- Muttaqin, Z., Pebriyani, N. D., & Suharto, S. (2024). Langkah Melestarikan Golok Walahir Sebagai Salah Satu Identitas Budaya Masyarakat Sindangkerta Tasikmalaya. *Gorga : Jurnal Seni Rupa*, 13(1), 238–243. <https://doi.org/10.24114/gr.v13i01.59493>
- Nawaz, A. (2025). World War II: A global conflict shaped by ideology, nationalism, and geopolitical tensions. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Trends*, 7(1), 113–123. <https://doi.org/10.22271/multi.2025.v7.i1b.615>
- Rahmat, S. P. N. (2021). Transformasi Dokumen Komunikasi Visual Sampul Buku Digital Dalam Metode Penelitian Kualitatif Perspektif Sosial Budaya Bidang Desain Komunikasi Visual. *Gorga : Jurnal Seni Rupa*, 10(1), 172. <https://doi.org/10.24114/gr.v10i1.25272>
- Soto-Martin, O., Fuentes-Porto, A., & Martin-Gutierrez, J. (2020). A Digital Reconstruction of a Historical Building and Virtual Reintegration of Mural Paintings to Create an Interactive and Immersive Experience in Virtual Reality. *Applied Sciences*, 10(2), 597. <https://doi.org/10.3390/app10020597>
- Srivastava, A. (2019). Digital Art: A Revolutionary Form of Art & Visual Communication. *International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH*, 7(11), 83–88. <https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v7.i11.2019.3705>
- Sudana, I. M., Setem, I. W., & Mudana, I. W. (2024). Palelintangan Dalam Seni Rupa Pop. *Gorga : Jurnal Seni Rupa*, 13(1), 361–367. <https://doi.org/10.24114/gr.v13i01.49166>
- Xue, D., Vazquez-Corral, J., Herranz, L., Zhang, Y., & Brown, M. S. (2024). Palette-Based Color Harmonization via Color Naming. *IEEE Signal Processing Letters*, 31, 1474–1478. <https://doi.org/10.1109/LSP.2024.3401612>
- Zahra, N., & Mansoor, A. Z. (2024). Warna dan Emosi Untuk Media Desain Interaktif: Literature Review. *Gorga : Jurnal Seni Rupa*, 13(1), 340–345. <https://doi.org/10.24114/gr.v13i01.57946>
- Zakharchenko, I. N., & Shchedrina, O. M. (2023). Artistic Visualization Of Digital Memory In Contemporary Media Art. *Articult*, 4, 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.28995/2227-6165-2023-4-33-46>