

# The Stuff of World War II

*Curators shape a modern museum of history.*

by NELL PORTER BROWN



**D**URING A FIELD TRIP to the Museum of World War II in Natick, Massachusetts, a burly high-school junior stopped at the glass case holding Adolf Hitler's personal effects: pills, powders, and ointments from his medicine cabinet; a monogrammed silver hand-mirror; and a leather mustache-trainer, worn at night to keep stray hairs in line.

"He said, 'Ah, I get it now!'" reports director of education Marshall W. Carter, Ed.M. '97. The student had connected the "personal vanity and megalomania with the dictator." It's just this sort of insight, Carter believes, that the museum—especially in its planned expansion—should induce. "The opportunity here," he explains, "is to understand that individuals in history had temperaments and agency that were very complex, and that those traits ended up affecting millions."

The museum is a plain, low-slung build-

**Clockwise from top: a Sherman tank dominates the "America Enters the War" exhibit; a German doll's belt buckle sports a swastika; British propaganda targeting women; Rendell, Carter, and Heywood; flags and other artifacts from the Pacific theater**

ing off Route 9, behind a Dick's Sporting Goods. It holds the most comprehensive collection of World War II artifacts in the world. "Other places will have a complete set of guns, or of uniforms," says Carter, or focus on one nation's involvement, or historic events, such as the Holocaust. "But what we have is the most global collection—material from every theater, from battlefronts, *and* home fronts, and no one else has attempted to do that." Some 8,000



documents and objects are on display, in mind-boggling breadth: from a draft of the 1938 Munich Agreement (with penciled

marginalia by Hitler and Neville Chamberlain) and a complete set of plans for D-Day (as well as a map with original notations on landings and units), to explosives disguised as lumps of coal, German enigma machines, a French sewing kit used to relay messages for the Resistance, and the bronze bust of Hitler that General George S. Patton used as a doorstop.

Another half-million items are in storage, including the latest acquisition, the most complete known mobile auxiliary surgical hospital—a 50-foot canvas tent, two operating tables, anesthesia equipment, thousands of instruments. “What’s amazing about it is the atmosphere it creates,” says Carter. “People entered that tent hanging on to life. And because of the innovation of the MASH, which was new to World War II, many people who would

**Samples of Hitler’s art supplies and watercolor works. Rendell says, “He rarely painted people.”**



have died were saved and went home.” That mobile hospital will likely be set up in the museum’s pending reincarnation as a two-story, 62,000-square-foot structure (six times its current size) slated to be built and fully open to the public within three years.

KENNETH W. RENDELL, who built his career as a dealer in historic documents, began the collection at age 16. Born in 1943, the Somerville native was unusually sensitive to shifting cultural perceptions of the

war. “In the 1940s I remember neighbors and friends of my parents coming back, mostly medics from the Pacific, and talking about the horrors,” he says, “but by the 1950s everyone was talking about the glories of war; no one could afford to remember the horrors because they were too devastating. I was struck by this and concerned, even though I was just a kid.” His goal in amassing the ephemera, then and now, is to “save the reality of the war, which reflects the very personal and complex causes and consequences, which were horrible—for everyone.”

## CURIOSITIES: Not Made for Walkin’

**Less a fête** for the feet than a feast for the eyes, much of the haute couture footwear on display in *Killer Heels: The Art of the High-Heeled Shoe* at the Currier Museum is “barely wearable,” admits curator Samantha Cataldo. “Any woman who has put her foot in a non-sensible shoe knows they are not comfortable.” Instead, the 150 shoes range from eighteenth-century European embroidered precursors of the “pump” to Dutch designer Iris van Herpen’s mounds of tangled black strands, which resemble

the roots in a mangrove swamp, and were produced by a 3-D printer. All are presented as design objects akin to titled sculpture, and as “layered cultural symbols in narratives of attraction, transformation,

**At left: “Unicorn Tayss,” Walter Steiger, spring 2013; Casuccio e Scalera per Loris Azzaro, 1974-79 (below); and gingham platform shoes, Vivienne Westwood, 1993**



empowerment, and play,” per exhibit notes from the original show organized by Lisa Small at the Brooklyn Museum last year.

Take Walter Steiger’s fetishistic “Unicorn Tayss.” Leopard-print vamps and ankle straps top six-inch curved stiletto heels, à la golden horns. Rem D. Koolhaas’s “Eamz” capture the industrial chic of mid-century designers Charles and Ray Eames: fire-engine red flats that appear hoisted by a metallic lever at the heel. Nicholas Kirkwood’s suede “Pumps,” encrusted with Swarovski crystals in a floral pattern, lack any utility.

Some 50 examples on display are historic, such as satin-weave-embroidered silk Manchu-era platforms, Chinese shoes for bound feet, and traditional wooden Japanese *geta* from the 1800s. They point to the Eastern origins of high heels. (Shoes have always walked the line “between form and function,” Cataldo says.) Stilted bath sandals in the Ottoman Empire kept feet dry, and heeled equestrian Persian footwear kept riders firmly in stirrups, but both soon evolved as fashion styles that represented physical status, beauty, and even worldly power.

Fast-forward to the twentieth century and Roger Vivier and Salvatore Ferragamo, the designers most often credited with “inventing” the stiletto heel. To create the blade they adapted extruded steel, Cataldo explains, a material also on the rise in transforming the world of architecture and the urban built landscape, largely in the form of skyscrapers. “That shoe was really when the high heel became a sex symbol,” she adds. Wearing them “changes our whole posture...pushing certain parts of the body out and other parts in.” However glamorous “killer heels” can be, they do have a polarizing effect. “For some people, putting heels on makes them feel taller and more confident and offers a sense of authority,” Cataldo notes. “For others, they symbolize objectification and constricting standards of beauty. Sometimes, too, people just find them erotic.”

Currier Museum of Art  
Manchester, New Hampshire  
[www.currier.org](http://www.currier.org)  
February 6-May 15

—N.P.B.



By 1999, his private collection had been consolidated at the Natick facility, but was open just to friends, scholars, war veterans and their families, and military personnel. (Longtime trustees include retired four-star general George W. Casey Jr., his-

torian Doris Kearns Goodwin, Ph.D. '68, and the director of the Churchill Museum and Cabinet War Rooms in London, Phil Reed.) The nonprofit museum was incorporated in 2011, when it started admitting members of the public by appointment.

Last fall, Rendell and his wife and business partner, Shirley McNerney Rendell, once a local television news reporter, hired professional senior staff: Carter, formerly the K-8 principal of Milton Academy, and Samantha Heywood, who left the Imperial

War Museums to become the founding director and director of exhibits. The museum is expected to stay open throughout construction, which could begin as early as next spring; visit [museumofworldwarii.org/visit.html](http://museumofworldwarii.org/visit.html) or e-mail [museumofworldwarii@yahoo.com](mailto:museumofworldwarii@yahoo.com) to make an appointment.

Just what shape the new museum's content, design, and

narrative structures will take is still a matter for curatorial interpretation. Right now, items are displayed chronologically in some two dozen areas—from "Germany in the 1920s" to "War Trials."

The white walls are largely covered by ingenious and often vitriolic propaganda posters produced by all the combatants; the rooms are simply lit. The dearth of dramatic display staging and what curators call "didactics" (explanatory texts that guide experience) allows visitors freedom to think about and absorb the staggering volume of materials at their own pace and psychological capacity. Three hours is recommended for a first-time visit.

How to retain "the intimacy of the objects and documents," given a much bigger space and crowds, "is one of the challenges," notes Heywood. The greater creative and intellectual puzzle, though, is figuring out how the complex scope of World War II will be conceptualized and tangibly portrayed. What could, or should, be taught? What is most relevant to a wide-ranging contemporary audience, especially to young people, and what might the war mean to them in the future?

For Carter, the museum's educational power lies precisely in that personal contact and potential for connection with

## ALL IN A DAY: Woolapalooza

**The 206-acre** Drumlin Farm Wildlife Sanctuary in Lincoln is Mass Audubon's only working farm-cum-educational center. Staff members tend livestock and bountiful vegetable and flower crops while safeguarding meadow, woodland, and pond habitats, and providing refuge for injured or orphaned wildlife—turkey vultures, red-tailed hawks, barred owls, a great horned owl, pheasants, and a fisher. "Ms. G," the Commonwealth's official state groundhog, also resides on site, but is generally not on public view.

The farm's annual Woolapalooza festival on March 26 supports these efforts to highlight the interconnection among animals, people, and the natural world. Twenty-six ewes will be freed from their winter coats, some just weeks after giving birth. (Seventeen appeared to be expecting at press time.) The rest of the celebratory day is filled with herding-dog demonstrations and farm-life and arts activities. Artisans also demonstrate how raw wool is washed, carded, spun, and eventually turned into sweaters.

"Many people think of farms as being active only when everything is green and growing," sanctuary director Renata Pomponi says, "but there are exciting things going on all year round in nature. One of the important ways New

England farmers use the winter is for other 'crops' like maple syrup and products like wool." At Woolapalooza, visitors can buy farm-tapped syrup, along with a lunch of farm produce and meat. All the barns will be open, as well as the four

miles of walking trails (weather permitting), because by late March, as Pomponi notes, "People are really ready to get outside again after a cold, long winter."

For those who shun crowds (and Woolapalooza has drawn thousands of visitors in the past), Drumlin Farm is also open daily. Classes and events include workshops on fermenting foods, making cheese, and running a chicken coop; night walks in search of owls; exploring the biological life of small ponds, and the fundamentals of Northeastern birding. ~N.P.B.



**Scenes from an early spring festival at Drumlin Farm in Lincoln, Massachusetts. See new lambs, try out the arts of spinning and weaving, and witness the annual rite of sheep-shearing.**

Mass Audubon's Drumlin Farm Wildlife Sanctuary [www.massaudubon.org/get-outdoors/wildlife-sanctuaries/drumlin-farm](http://www.massaudubon.org/get-outdoors/wildlife-sanctuaries/drumlin-farm) March 26, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.



COURTESY OF DRUMLIN FARM WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

the primary materials of history, including apparent detritus like the bit of tickertape reading, "THE WAR IS OVER." As the living memory of the war dims, he knows, it is the ephemera that keep history, and its lessons, alive. And so the museum, atypically, allows students and teachers to touch objects: to feel "a soldier's backpack, the heft of a rifle, or run their fingers along the scarred grooves of a Sherman tank hit by fire, or look through...binoculars that were on the deck of the USS *Arizona* at Pearl Harbor." He has already begun building the educational programs, and expects to guide more than 1,500 students through the collection before June.

Even the handwritten documents under glass convey the human touch, he adds, "with the ink and the loops of the cursive letters...and the scratch outs and amendments." Of the museum's trove of personal journals, notes, and manuscripts, Dwight D. Eisenhower's letters to his wife, Mamie, are especially emotional, given common perceptions of the man as the cool-headed supreme commander of the allied forces in Europe. "It is a terribly sad business to tot up the casualties each day," he wrote on April 16, 1944. "Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, wives, and friends must have a difficult time preserving any comforting philosophy...War demands great toughness of fibre—not only in the soldiers that must endure, but in the home that must sacrifice their best." By revealing the multidimensionality and vulnerabilities of great leaders, Carter hopes that students will more readily explore their own characters—and act on their capacities for empathy, bravery, and even heroism.

HEYWOOD BELIEVES war is not inevitable: "It happens because men and women make choices," she asserts. "The majority of us get along in life without conflict at every turn, and 'peace' is the norm for most of us on the planet." But she also acknowledges that wars will "probably always happen," and therefore any serious war museum should address "why and how did wars happen, and how and why can they be avoided?"

To that point, the museum's newest exhibit, on anti-Semitism between 1919 and 1939, opening April 8 at the New-York Historical Society, illustrates the incremental rise of prejudicial hatred. Rare documents

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Willem de Kooning, *Untitled (The Cow Jump Over the Moon)*, 1972-78. © The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



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are highlighted, but so are items like pamphlets, shop signs, ashtrays, and postcards that Heywood says “helped ‘normalize’ anti-Semitism in German society.” To create the show, she spent months culling through the archives. “A depressing task,” she adds. “But enabling people today to see material like this, knowing what it led to during the war, may lead to them think afresh about discrimination, or about politics today.”

Rendell wants the museum to reflect the continuing “relevance of this period, 1920-1945.” On the domestic front, he notes parallels between the political mood of 1920s Germany and the “staggering number of disaffected Americans...we have people who are broken and humiliated, who don’t have jobs, and there’s no sense of [positive] nationalism,” he says. “And that is so dangerous.”

In his view, the nation’s current political divisiveness and dysfunction recall the gridlock evident in 1940 in Washington, D.C., when President Franklin Roosevelt was “stuck between the isolationists and the interventionists.” Decisive action occurred only after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and after Hitler and his followers had already wrought unprecedented destruction. “I get really irritated when people talk about how we won the war, when more than 400,000 American soldiers died,” he says. “That’s not winning. We didn’t lose as badly as others—but nobody wins war. And the more the museum can make people aware of that—of the realities of war, of the very serious consequences—the better.”



**A French wedding dress made from an American reserve parachute; binoculars salvaged from the deck of the USS Arizona**



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