A Jewish artist of the Holocaust and the dangers of hate speech today

As RE studies the Holocaust quite often, teachers need to approach this most harrowing of topics with care, but also sometimes with fresh resources. Here is Phillip Schwartz's 2018 artwork based on the Prophet Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones. Use it with 11–18s to examine some of the ways these dreadful events should and could be remembered.

Phillip Schwartz (**www.phillipschwartz.com**) is a Jewish artist working in New York City. Strongly influenced by his love of Eastern European icon painting in Christian traditions, and by his own family memories of Holocaust survivors, he created this work, *Loading a Funeral Cart*, which was featured in an exhibition in 2018 mounted by the Jewish Art Salon, an international artists and scholars organisation for contemporary Jewish visual art. The exhibition was called 'On the Consequences of Hate Speech'.

Begin work with pupils by warning them that the art they are learning from today is challenging, and addresses the most serious of subjects. Emotional engagement – including distress – is possible. Show the picture and ask pupils to look at it in silence for 2 minutes, paying close attention to every detail, including the gold, the frame and the emotions – and the picture as a whole. If you want to, ask them to sketch the outline in pencil for themselves in the next 4 minutes – this is a good way to encourage the learners to really examine what the artist has drawn. Then, with a partner, they can share what they have seen.

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Next, provide pupils with the additional information in the grid below, one piece at a time – a good way to do this is to make card sets for groups of four and have them read out two pieces of information/ interpretation to each other and discuss them.

Lat Blaylock, RE Today Editor

Grateful thanks to Phillip Schwartz for the use of his wonderful painting.

Further tasks

- Write a 250-word description and analysis of this picture, to go in the 'gallery catalogue' for the exhibition in which this painting was shown. Include details of your interpretation and the things it has made you think about.
- In Ezekiel's prophecy, the dry bones in the valley are enlivened. Ezekiel prophesies to the bones, and they come to life. God says to his people: 'I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken' (Ezekiel 37:14 NIV). Why do you think Phillip Schwartz chose these Bible verses for his iconic picture?
- What examples of hate speech in your contemporary world are you noticing? What do you think of the idea that hate speech, unchallenged, can lead to discrimination, persecution and even genocide?
- Review the 'Modern Martyrs' section of Phillip Schwartz's website and select from it another work that impresses you. Compare the work with the one we have been studying. (NB The nature and content of the images will require the teacher to check them beforehand for suitability of use with pupil age group.)
- You might like to create a work of art of your own in response to the thinking of this lesson. Lots of interesting examples on similar themes can be seen at **bit.ly/SpiritedArtsGallery2021**. You could enter your work for the NATRE Spirited Arts competition.

A PowerPoint presentation supports this article, available on the NATRE website.

One of the horrors of the Nazi genocide, which murdered six million Jewish people, is that bodies were not buried properly, but often burned or left in pits. Jewish people in the death camps were forced to fill in mass graves.	The Jewish scriptures include the writings of the Prophet Ezekiel, who spoke the word of the Lord to the community about 26 centuries ago. He had a vision of a valley full of dead, dried bones. God asked him: can these dry bones live?	Phillip Schwartz's painting shows at least 16 people whose bodies are being taken for burial. They are barely individual at all. Their starved bodies are broken, mixed up and tragic, horrific.	The man loading the funeral cart gazes straight at us. His expression of woe and sadness is also challenging: what do we make of what we are looking at here?
Phillip, the artist, says that he wants his work to remind us of the sacred quality of life, and wants us to accept that the taking of the lives of the millions murdered by the Nazis was the largest-scale desecration of God's creation the world has ever known.	Phillip Schwartz uses a quotation from Ezekiel 37 in his artwork. God asks the Prophet if a valley full of dry bones can live again. Ezekiel replies: 'O Lord God, you know.' Read the rest of the chapter to find out what happens next in the vision.	The man loading the funeral cart looks weak. But he lifts the body of a dead woman as carefully as he can. Both he and the woman have haloes of silver around their heads: an artist's symbol that these people are holy.	Art does not need to have a message, but this work does make you think. When anti-semitic hate speech, or other kinds of hate speech, go unchallenged, we seem to have more thinking to do and action to take for the future.