

## Artists document Air Force history with art

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1/24/2003 - **WASHINGTON** -- First-time visitors to the Pentagon might expect to see star-studded generals and high-tech "war rooms." What they might not expect is that the walls of this 60-year-old building not only frame its famous catacomb hallways, but also double as an art gallery.

The Air Force Art Program is responsible for acquiring and managing this dizzying array of Air Force-related artwork. The program, which began in 1950, has amassed more than 8,000 pieces of art -- mostly paintings -- that document aircraft, people, battles and locations significant to Air Force history. Some of those paintings, said the program's director, are older than the Air Force itself.

"Some of the oldest pieces we have in the collection were donated by the Rockefellers -- art by Henry Farre," Russell Kirk said. "Those paintings date back to the early 1900s. Farre was one of the first aviation documenters for warfare."

The first 800 or so paintings, Kirk said, were donated to the Air Force collection by the Army when the program first began. The remainder of the works were done mostly at the request of the Air Force and were donated to the collection by the artists themselves.

The Air Force Art Program does not buy art. Rather, the program coordinates with various agencies to get artists out of the studio and in the field, embedding them with Air Force units so they can photograph, sketch and collect other source material they will need to produce a painting. The Air Force essentially sends them on a temporary-duty assignment for the purpose of producing art.

"When these artists go out on a trip, the purpose is to give them a better understanding of the Air Force mission," Kirk said. Each artist typically belongs to one of a number of official organizations, including the Societies of Illustrators of New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, as well as the Midwest Air Force Artists and the Southwest Air Force Artists.

Each society reviews its members' work before offering them as gifts and then makes a formal presentation to the Air Force once every two years at the Air Force Art Program's presentation held on Andrews Air Force Base, Md. The presentation is co-hosted by the secretary and chief of staff of the Air Force.

Program participants are not novices, Kirk said. Some demand five-figure prices for their work when they sell to civilian patrons. That they choose to donate some of their work to the Air Force, however, is no surprise.

"One reason is just the feeling of patriotism," said John Witt, an artist who has been doing work for the program since the early 1980s. "These artists love their country and support their armed services. Many, like myself, are former military and have experience doing art for the services. When the call comes, they are willing to do it. Even if that is during their vacation time, or if they are freelance and they have to stop what they are working on to complete the job."

Witt is currently working on a painting for the program featuring a youthful Staff Sgt. Henry "Red" Erwin, a World War II Medal of Honor recipient. Erwin, at great danger to himself, picked up a burning phosphorous bomb that had ignited inside his B-29 Superfortress aircraft and threw it out a cockpit window. Erwin's face and body were severely burned from handling the device, but his actions saved the aircraft and crew.

One difficulty in completing this most current work is ensuring the historical accuracy of what he portrays, Witt said. There was little documentation or source material on which to base his work.



WASHINGTON -- Artist John Witt works on a painting featuring Staff Sgt. Henry "Red" Erwin, a World War II Medal of Honor recipient. Witt has been doing work for the Air Force Art Program since the early 1980s. (Courtesy photo)

"Getting the research has been hard," he said. "There was only one small photo of him before he had been burned. I've been (looking) to find what that phosphorous bomb looks like, but I can't find it. Right now in the painting, he is holding what looks like an oatmeal can."

Often times the artists are on their own when doing a historical piece, Witt said.

"(Sometimes) there is no photo to copy from," Witt said. "You have to do it all from imagination. It's a lot of reference, and you've got to make sure all your references are accurate. It's a good three months of solid work. You can't take on any other assignments. I've got other people who want to be painted, but I can't do anything until I get this done."

When completed, the painting will be on display at the Enlisted Research Library on the Maxwell Air Force Base Gunter Annex in Alabama. The library will be dedicated in honor of the recently deceased Erwin.

While most works held by the Air Force Art Program are currently on display at the Pentagon or at major command headquarters around the globe, all the works are available for viewing by the public on the program's Web site.

Additionally, the Air Force has work on public display at the Richmond Aviation Museum and at the Mighty 8th Air Force Museum in Georgia. The program is currently working with the College Park Aviation Museum in College Park, Md., to display some works there. It is at these public displays where Air Force art really has the most impact, Kirk said.

"This artwork tells of the Air Force's different missions and stories, and I've seen the kids who are looking at (the exhibits)," Kirk said. "Those kids are 5 and 10 years old, and they are captivated by them. Or there is a guy who is 80-some years old, and he's looking at a painting of a B-20, and he's back there. You talk to him about it, and he has all this history to tell you. It's all about history, and it's all about telling the story of our rich heritage."