

Stroll the Air Force corridors in the Pentagon, and the first thing that strikes many “Puzzle Palace” newcomers is the art adorning the walls of the world’s largest office building.

Tour the building’s fabled “E” ring, and F-15 fighters zoom from the canvas. B-17 bombers over German refineries whisk the observer back to an Air Force far removed from the high-tech, stealth world of today’s airman. Round a corner and meet air aces from wars past and the senior leaders that shaped and molded today’s service.



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“It’s like stepping into a time portal,” said Senior Airman Sonia Moore, an administrative executive specialist. She has been at the Pentagon almost a year, and the art still stops and captivates her when she walks by.

“Some pictures just grab you,” she said. “Sometimes I’ll stop and stare. I can look at the images, the uniforms and know how they felt, worked and lived.”

The images that snare the imagination of a 25-year-old three-striper are but a handful in the vast Air Force art collection. The Pentagon is the largest showcase for the art, but paintings are spread around the globe at every base.

The Air Force Art Program celebrates its 50th anniversary this month. But, even at 50, it’s a mere babe in the realm of art and war. Art has been the primary means of visually capturing history since man depicted his struggles on cave walls. Artists traveled with Roman armies to capture scenes of war and great victories. American artists have documented every war since the Revolution.

In 1950, Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Air Force chief of staff, established the program. It began with an infusion of art from the Army which transferred more than 800 works depicting the early days of the Army Air Corps. In 1951, the Air Force asked many of America’s better known artists and illustrators to visit air bases and capture their view of America’s Air Force.

Since then, the service has sponsored artists’ trips around the world. The result is a priceless art collection capturing Air Force history in a way photographs, film or video can’t.

“One of the biggest milestones was when the Air Force invited the Society of Illustrators of New York to participate in the program,” said Bob “Hap” Arnold, program director. In 1952 the New York society took its first tour with the program. This step legitimized the program and built a foundation to grow on.

Since the initial trip, the Society of Illustrators from Los Angeles, San Francisco, Midwest Air Force Artists and Southwest Artists have joined the program. In addition, many independent artists contribute.

Artists donate their work on officially sponsored trips — usually as an outright gift to the government — and they’re accepted by the Secretary of the Air Force. Each society reviews its members’ works before offering them as gifts. Then it makes a formal presentation to the Air Force, Mr. Arnold explained.

“You can’t overstate the importance of this program to the history of the Air Force,” said artist Keith Ferris. “There are things artists can do on canvas you can’t capture in any other medium.” (See related story Page 45)

Ferris should know. He’s been donating art to the program for 40 years. He’s traveled worldwide — chasing after and recreating Air Force life. He will donate his 52nd and 53rd pieces of art to the program this year.



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Donations of time and talent by artists like Mr. Ferris are invaluable to the program.

“To posterity, these paintings furnish a priceless pictorial history of our Air Force in a brilliant era,” wrote then-Air Force Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis E. LeMay in a 1960 National Geographic article about the art program.

“Future Americans, accustomed to split-second travel through measureless space, may find these scenes as antiquated as covered wagons seem today. Yet they record a chapter in the life of our Air Force as vital as Kitty Hawk.”

General LeMay, an ardent supporter of the program and a member of the National Geographic Society, was struck by the artwork the same as Airman Moore.

“I like to look at these paintings,” he wrote. “Even though I’ve piloted our mightiest jets to far off reaches of the globe, still ... I find armchair travel stimulating. These compositions of form, color and light are more than glimpses of faraway places. Each is a moment in the life of your United States Air Force.”

General LeMay’s description of the art program is as valid today as it was 40 years ago. The general, who died in October 1990, probably would be glad to know people like Airman Moore appreciate what he supported and that the program will continue capturing Air Force history on canvas for generations to come.

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