NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER

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THE U.S. ARMY ART PROGRAM
A HISTORY

Prior to World War I, the U.S. Army had no centralized collection or formal art program, although individual artists did record Army activities. They worked on their own initiative, in the employ of publishers or through private commissions. Recognizing the importance of military art as both a historical record and a positive influence on morale, the Army commissioned a team of eight artists into the Corps of Engineers during World War I and sent them to France to record the activities of the American Expeditionary Forces. Their mandate was to depict the activities of the Army or the individual soldiers in the style or medium in which they felt most comfortable.

When the artwork was completed, the Army had no facility to store and care for it, and the collection subsequently was turned over to the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History.

At the beginning of World War II, the Army saw the need to revive its art program to document the war effort. In 1942, the Corps of Engineers established a War Art Unit, which was to record and portray events of military importance, incidents in the daily life of the soldier, frontline operations, combat service support, and views of the areas of operations.

A War Art Advisory Committee was formed with George Biddle, the eminent painter and sculptor, as chairman. Among the board members was noted author John Steinbeck. By spring 1943, the Advisory Board had selected 42 artists—23 military on active duty and 19 civilians—to document the war's activities. The first teams arrived in the Pacific theater in May.

On August 31, 1943, Congress withdrew funding for the program and the military artists were reassigned to other units. The civilian artists looked for commissions elsewhere to support the program, and eventually found their salvation in Daniel Longwell, executive editor of *Life* magazine.

Longwell contacted Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy with an offer to add the civilian artists to *Life's* corps of war correspondents. Seventeen accepted the offer to join the *Life* staff.

In a joint understanding with the Army, *Life* provided billets and transportation, ensuring continuity in the creation of artwork. The effort resulted in a variety of artistic pieces by such distinguished artists as Aaron Bohrod, Tom Craig, Edward Laning, Tom Lea, Peter Hurd, Reginald Marsh, Fletcher Martin, Ogden Pleissner, Henry Varnum Poor, and Byron Thomas.

Other corporations also funded military art programs. Abbott Laboratories commissioned one in cooperation with the Office of the Surgeon General. Twelve

artists, among them Joseph Hirsch, Lawrence Ball Smith, Marion Greenwood, Francis Criss, and John Steuart Curry, recorded the work of the Army medical staff. In their paintings, these artists depicted medical activities during training, at the front lines and in stateside hospitals.

In June 1944, Congress authorized soldier-artists to produce artwork in the European and Pacific theaters with the stipulation that it did not interfere with their regular duty assignments. With Army support, soldier-artists in Europe documented the campaigns in North Africa, Sicily, and Northern Europe. Headquartered in Manila, the Pacific unit covered events in the Philippines, China, Japan, and Korea, until disbanded in 1946.

By the summer of 1945, the Army had acquired more than 2,000 works of art produced by soldiers, and in June, the Office of the Army Headquarters Commandant established the Historical Properties Section to maintain and exhibit the collection. A newly formed War Department Art Committee, composed of prominent art experts from the National Gallery of Art, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Phillips Collection, and the Department of the Treasury was given responsibility to review art submitted to the Historical Properties Section.

These initial acquisitions evolved into the Army Art Collection, which is now administered by the U. S. Army Center of Military History, Museum Division, Fort McNair, D.C.

Among the artwork transferred to the Army was a collection of original poster art used to advertise the war effort. These pieces, some easily recognizable, were created by such distinguished illustrative artists as Norman Rockwell, Jes Schlaikjer, and Dean Cornwell. *Yank* magazine also transferred its collection of cartoons and drawings to the Army Art Collection.

The Army's World War II collection became even more complete on December 7, 1960, with the addition of the civilian-produced artwork. Henry R. Luce, editor in chief of Time-Life, Inc., presented more than 1,000 paintings of the *Life* Collection to Deputy Secretary of Defense James H. Douglas. These paintings, many of which appeared in *Life*, cover not only the Army, but include images documenting Army Air Corps, Navy, and Marine activities.

Although World War II was fully documented, there were no official Army artists assigned to cover the Korean War. What art there is covering this time period was obtained from various artists through donation or purchase, or has been created from still photographs.

In 1965, as combat in Vietnam escalated, the Chief of Military History developed the Army Art Program to document Army activities. The program was set up to utilize the talent of both military and professional civilian artists.

From 1966 to 1968, U. S. Army Special Services sponsored thirty-six soldiers to serve four- to five-month tours. For sixty days, the artists sketched and photographed images in the war zone and then spent the rest of the time producing studio paintings from their preliminary sketches. Ten civilian artists also toured Vietnam, and their completed paintings were donated to the Army.

Since 1965, the Army Art Program has sent artists to many parts of the world to produce historical records of Army field activities. The art collection documents operations in Thailand, Japan, Europe, Panama, Southwest Asia, and the United States. Artists have covered the humanitarian efforts in Somalia, Army disaster relief after Hurricane Andrew, contingency operations in Haiti and Panama, and the Gulf War and peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and Kosovo.

The U.S. Army Art Collection did not escape the horror of September 11, 2001. Eight paintings hanging in the Pentagon were destroyed in the attack. Although these pieces were lost, the collection continues to flourish, one of the most recent additions depicting the aftermath of the attack. Today, Army soldier-artists, deployed to current operations, continue to record the history of America's Army as it is made. Many generous benefactors, among them the artists themselves, have also given works to the collection so that it continues to grow in its historical richness and artistic variety.