

TRUE COLORS**AIR FORCE HONORS AMERICAN SOLDIERS IN ART**

Exclusive: Marisa Martin spotlights works crafted on the front lines

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For millennia the realms of war and art were as entwined as a soldier's fingers in his trusty gauntlet. Along with religion and the grandeur of monarchs, military glory occupied vast acreage on palace and temple walls.

Unfortunately some things never seem to change, and the existence of war is one of them. Commemorative paintings and statues are small comfort to the grieving, though generally created with good intentions. Over time and diminished memories, they become just art – some of it the best that was ever made.

Our military may not have funds for a modern day Arch de Triomphe or Battle of Trafalgar, yet they host, exhibit and promote boatloads of military themed art, particularly the Air Force.

In 1950 the U.S. Army transferred some 800 works of art documenting the early days of the Army Air Corps to the budding United States Air Forces Art Program, USAFAP. Original pieces date to the early 20th century. They include works by Henri Farre, a French pilot-artist from World War I and captured German art from World War II, a type of war booty I imagine.

At this point their extensive collection exists of about 10,000 pieces of aviation art of various mediums, and it all begins with the Pentagon. Specifically the chief of art is known as Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III.

America's brass still values the arts, and for some of the same reasons as the ancients but with a little modern polish. Traditional military art is a form of record keeping, historic accuracy or, in the case of propaganda, historic inaccuracy.

Scratched into an ancient Egyptian wall at Karnak is a depiction of a war scene from the 12th or 13th century



Dog shot by Afghan soldiers, art by Steve Mumford

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B.C., one of the oldest images around. Archaeologists believe the battle was waged between Egyptians and early Israelites. Of course the Egyptians claimed to be victorious.

From the classical Greeks on, military art eulogized individuals who died or were injured, also those who fought with valor. Where doesn't some general loom in limestone over a town square or their exploits recounted in prose or paint?

The U.S. Air Force is no exception; they just do it less conspicuously. Part of their art stash includes a series of portraits of military leaders, such as Major General Chenault from 1950. Most are traditional drawings or paintings, realistically rendered and conservative in style – but there are exceptions.

The USAF describes the purpose behind their art collection as both historical and educational, to “expose the role and diverse capabilities” of the United States Air Force.

Although contemporary USAF art is more illustrative, rarely reaching for fine art status, there is a tradition of artists following our troops since the Revolutionary War. Only relatively recently was the USAFAP made official, but art was always there and in the military tradition goes a long way.

In 2007 the program had approximately 250 active artists, but over the years, it represents hundreds. Artists may be active members of the armed forces, such as reservist Maj. Warren Neary, who chronicles a med-evac mission from Afghanistan.

“Bandage 33” depicts two airmen at Kandahar, Afghanistan, caring for Tech. Sgt. Zach Rhyner after he was critically wounded in 2013. Onboard with them the entire time, Neary captured the turbulence and life-threatening crisis as they struggled to save Rhyner.

“It is this moment that I worked to capture in the painting,” Neary said. “They saved his life.”

Why employ painters and sculptors after Kodak and cameras? War correspondents and cameramen may faithfully record every digital jot and tittle, but accuracy isn't everything, or portraiture and landscape painting would have died decades ago.

Human perception, dramatic story telling or using discernment – all those things a camera can't easily do (although some say with Photoshop all things are possible). To capture a story, show compassion, create a tableau or to simplify complex human and political situations are often an artist's challenge. Rarely does a single photograph manage it, and videos are not a medium the USAFAP seems to have embraced much for artistic purposes.

The Cold War wrought many changes in military art, reflecting how war was “marketed” in a sense. Victory, sacrifice and patriotism were universally unquestioned during the World Wars, and there was a draft, so no shortage of men.

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Officials openly admit the purpose of combat art in the last century by the U.S. and allies was done “in support of domestic and foreign ‘propaganda’ and public information programs.” Even Hollywood pitched a hand – a big one. Since then the heady exuberance and aggressive tone of the 1940s has been dimmed way down.

Without a draft, soldiers and the public must be convinced of two things at least: that the nation is worth defending and risking our lives; and that we are in some type danger, either directly or indirectly. Military art may not address the first concern, but it can illuminate the second quite well. It’s a unique type of live, reportorial illustration that can capture the energy and pulse of the moment better than anything else we have yet discovered.