

AMERICA'S FORGOTTEN

SOLDIER ART:

The Camp Art Programs, 1940-1945

Peter Harrington

Studies of American art during the period of World War Two often fail to acknowledge the ‘solder art’ programs that emerged in the numerous training camps around the United States between 1940 and 1944.¹ They miss this critical development by moving from the Federal Art Project (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of 1935-1943, established to provide employment to tens of thousands of artists during the Great Depression, directly into the 1943 War Art Program sponsored by the U.S. Army and the other official combat art programs of the Navy and Marines. Such studies fail to make the connection between the FAP and the War Art Program, and the intervening art programs in the training camps. In fact, the genesis of the army art program can be shown to have been the camp art schemes that developed under the auspices of the Special Services Division of the War Department established in 1941 by the army to organize morale, recreation, and welfare functions for soldiers. Indeed, these schemes fed directly into that combat art program as noted by Sidney Simon, an artist who had been tasked by the Corps of Engineers to form an Army War Art Unit in the fall of 1942: ‘My orders were to

¹ For example, see Robert Henkes, *World War II in American Art* (London, 2001); Barbara McCloskey, *Artists of World War II* (Westport, 2005), 174-8; Monica Bohm-Duchen, *Art and the Second World War* (Princeton, 2014), chapter 4.

find the talent from those already in the Army just sketching on the East coast camps. I found over fifty artists. Some had already been doing art scenes'.²

With war raging across Europe and Asia and with the inevitability of some involvement, the United States Congress passed the Selective and Training Act of 1940, requiring all men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five to register with their local draft boards. This resulted in a massive influx of inductees into training camps around the country. To house the new recruits, temporary barracks and recreation halls were constructed at a cost of over \$165,000,000; other military buildings had been constructed by unemployed workers of the WPA and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) after 1933. At Fort Belvoir, Virginia, a total of six hundred and forty-three buildings were erected there between 1940 and 1942 as part of the Temporary Emergency Construction Program.³

² Sidney Simon, letter to the author, July 1994; see John D. Millett, *The Army Service Forces: The Organization and Role of the Army Service Forces*, (Washington, D.C., 1954), 348. For a discussion of the 1943 program, see Peter Harrington, 'The 1943 War Art Program', *Army History*, 55 (2002), 4-19.

³ Shebrina Bailey, 'Belvoir barracks "backdraft"', *Belvoir Eagle*, (March 5, 1998). For details of the WPA construction program, see *Built by WPA CCC 1933-1943. New Deal Historic Resources on Department of Defense Installations*, (Washington, D.C., Department of Defense Legacy Program).

Murals had been become a popular form of expression during the WPA era to improve the interiors of [*Jose Clemente Orozco in Guadalajara*] government buildings, libraries, post offices and a range of other structures. [These included military installations and often took as their theme America's military history such as a scene of the World War One battle of Cantigny painted by Hubert H. Crawford in the Fort Niagara Officers Club, New York between 1938 and 1940. However, the development of actual art programs for soldiers really began in earnest after the arrival of the new draftees from 1940 onwards. For example, on August 18, 1941, an 'experimental' art project was initiated at Fort Bragg, North Carolina by the American Federation of Arts and the College Art Association, 'to explore the possibilities, advantages, and limitations of a recreational program employing the arts for the enjoyment and participation of soldiers at the camp'.⁴

The art critic Florence S. Berryman, writing in the October 1942 issue of the *Magazine of Art*, noted that one of the Fort Bragg artists, Corporal Frank Duncan had approached various national organizations by stating that the primary aim of the Studio Workshop, 'will be to encourage the men of the armed forces to re-create

⁴ 'Experiment at Fort Bragg', *Magazine of Art* 35, No. 1, (January 1942), p. 41.

scenes from the depths of experience totally foreign to most of us; to record and preserve for all time, as a part of America's heritage'.⁵

Berryman's article briefly highlighted other projects such as the one at the Signals Corps Replacement Centre at Camp Crowder in Neosho, Missouri where similar appeals for money had beneficial results. Here, the Special Service Section officer had discovered a group of soldier-artists working independently during their off-hours in the spring of 1942. A building had been converted into an art workshop and the thirty-five soldier-artists who responded to the call found twenty-two easels, tables, art books and magazines, while the walls were hung with reproductions of famous paintings provided by the Special Service Section.

A similar situation was occurring at Keesler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi, where two soldier-artists, Privates Manual Bromberg and Harry Dix, were spearheading art activities in the camp. Along with other artists, sculptors and photographers, the two developed an extensive program to improve the cultural atmosphere and physical surroundings of the camp.⁶ Elsewhere, at Camp Berkeley outside Abilene, Texas, Corporal Samuel D. Smith painted military scenes as murals with the encouragement of the base commander; while at the Cavalry School

⁵ Florence S. Berryman, 'Guns and Brushes', *Magazine of Art* 35, No. 6, (October 1942), p. 215.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 217. Many of the paintings and photographs created at Keesler Field were reproduced in *Art of the Soldier* edited by T/Sgt. Paul Magriel and published at the camp in 1943.

Detachment at Fort Riley, Kansas, Technical Sergeant John B. Lear, Jr., who had been assigned to the Reproduction Department, was so successful at sketching the men in his unit that he was selected to do portraits of the officers.⁷

Corporal Albert Rudnick who was working at the Fort Bragg studio turned out a ‘daily drawing illustrating some aspect of military life [...]. Each day one of his drawings under the caption “Stop. Look and Learn,” is placed in the rack, thus proving that one picture is worth many words of lengthy explanation’.⁸ Outside Washington, D.C. at Fort Meade, Maryland, home of the 603rd Camouflage Battalion, artists were actively recruited and the camp adjutant sent letters to various publications inviting artists to apply to the unit.⁹ Every Wednesday afternoon at Fort Dix, New Jersey, some four hundred part-time soldier-artists crowded into two fully-equipped art schools located in the recreation centers. This was all due to a lecture given in 1942 at the fort by Boris Blai of the Tyler School of Fine Arts at Temple University in Philadelphia, who had told the soldiers ‘that anyone could learn to use his hands to express himself.’¹⁰

⁷ *The Art Digest*, 17 (8), (January 15, 1943), 10.

⁸ *The Art Digest*, 17 (8), (January 15, 1943), 10.

⁹ One letter appeared in the *New York Times*, July 19, 1942, p. 6.

¹⁰ ‘Art and Discipline’, *Time*, August 30, 1943, p. 60.

One of the earliest and most successful soldier art programs was at Fort Custer near Battle Creek, Michigan, built in 1917. Self-styled the 'Fort Custer Illustrators', a group of soldier-artists under the direction of Captain George O. Kribs, the Special Service Officer, and Sidney W. Seeley, the Art Director from the Michigan Arts and Crafts, began creating paintings and murals representing army life in the early summer of 1941 with the encouragement and sponsorship of the Post Morale Office. The genesis behind it was a presentation of a program in Arts and Crafts as a recreational activity.¹¹ When the artists first gathered in the Service Club in March 1941, the idea was that it would serve as a purely recreational pursuit and a hobby for those soldiers artistically inclined. Art materials were hastily acquired and given to the men embarking on maneuvers in Tennessee.¹² The soldier-artists returned from the war games armed with scores of sketches and drawings, and the results represented,

everyday events in a soldier's life; these events seem to give him a sense that his every task, however small, is necessary to the war effort...they

¹¹ Acknowledgment to *As Soldiers See it, by the Fort Custer Army Illustrators*, (New York, 1943).

¹² 'Custer artwork has N.Y. showing', *Army Times*, January 3, 1942, p. 2; *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 3, IX, (1942), 2-5.

are part of the need for clean living, for many must live in close quarters. They are part of the morale of the alert soldier. His barracks is his home and the paintings help him develop a pride in his home as well as in his growing, firing, and maneuvering.¹³

The illustrators held a number of annual exhibitions at the Camp Service Club. The first to showcase soldier art opened in early August 1941, and the *Magazine of Art* reproduced some of the sketches in its October issue. So impressive was the quality of the artwork that a selection of sketches, drawings and photographs was chosen for exhibition in February 1942 by Monroe Wheeler, the Director of Exhibitions of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. The museum *Bulletin* in an article entitled ‘Army Illustrators’ published the same month, noted that Major General Joseph M. Cummins, Commander General, Sixth Corps Area, had been one of the first commanding officers to recognize the importance of such artistic endeavors in the army for building morale and visualizing life in camp and in the field. It was the hope of the museum that other posts and training stations would follow the Fort Custer example.¹⁴ In the same issue, it was announced that MOMA had appointed James Thrall Soby to direct its Armed Services Program designed to

¹³ Foreword to *As Soldiers See it*.

¹⁴ *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, 3, IX (1942), 3-4.

further encourage the arts in other camps. Its three primary objectives were to provide facilities and materials, to make use of the talents of artists for therapeutic work among disabled soldiers and sailors, and to make the Museum's facilities available for the entertainment of men in the armed services and merchant navies of the Allied Nations.¹⁵

To fund this program, the museum organized a sale of paintings in May 1942 and five hundred and sixty-six works were donated by trustees and friends. This realized an impressive sum of \$16,000 and almost a dozen camps benefited from this funding allowing the creation of studios and the purchase of art materials.¹⁶ Fulfilling one of its goals, the Department of Circulating Exhibitions at the museum sponsored the exhibit of the Fort Custer paintings entitled *U.S. Army Illustrators*, which traveled to ten cities, while some of the proceeds of the sale financed a competition entitled *The Arts in Therapy*.

Similar developments were emerging around the country and were actively encouraged by the military as well as other government agencies such as the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) which had launched a national competition within days of the attack on Pearl Harbor for soldier-artists to record unrestricted defense and war activities, and eight experienced artists were appointed to record

¹⁵ 'Armed Services Program', *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, 1, X (1942), 15.

¹⁶ 'Life's art competition for men in the armed forces', *Life*, July 6, 1942, p.30.

war work under the auspices of the Army and Navy. By January 15, 1942, 2,582 watercolors, drawings and prints had been submitted by 1189 artists, and a total of one hundred and nine pieces were selected for purchase by the O.E.M. and exhibited at the National Gallery in Washington, DC in February, before embarking on a national tour. Another competition sponsored by *Life* magazine in the spring of 1942 offered prizes for the best soldier art.¹⁷

With so many programs around the country, it was decided to standardize the practices of art in camps and to assist Special Service Officers in making the fullest use of artists. The Special Services Division therefore published a booklet in early 1943 entitled *Interior Design and Soldier Art* which grew out of a letter dated December 24, 1942 sent by the Commanding General, Services of Supply, to all Service Commands on the subject. It's goals were 'to improve interiors of recreational buildings and other places of assembly; to surround military personnel with a cheerful and attractive environment, reflecting the traditions, accomplishments and high standards of army life; to impress upon the mind such object lessons as the importance of camouflage, military behavior, dress, etc.; and to

¹⁷ 'A Call to Action', *Magazine of Art* 35, No. 3 (1942), 96-101; 'Visual History – 1942'; *Ibid*, 35, No. 4, (1942), 141-143; *Life*, July 6, 1942, p. 30-6.

produce an atmosphere that will be conducive to the development of esprit de corps, a spirit of sacrifice and a will to win'.¹⁸

While acknowledging that 'art isn't going to make soldiers', the thirty-six-page booklet reaffirmed some of the principles set out in the 1942 letter by stating that art, 'can be a powerful psychological force and inspiration in keeping before us the ideals for which we fight'.¹⁹

Twenty-five thousand copies were printed using proceeds from the MOMA sale. They contained advice on the decoration of military buildings and included photographs of murals at various camps along with a picture of the soldier-artists working in their studio at Fort Belvoir. There were sections on how to organize an art program and the personnel, the equipment needed and funding. It offered designs for decorating service clubs, day-rooms, recreation halls and mess halls. Chapter III covered art activities including art classes, portrait painting, art exhibits, sculpture, mural and easel pictures, theatre scenery, posters and illustrations, cartoons, decorations for special events and military aids.

¹⁸ Clipping from *Special Service Digest*, 1943 entitled 'Book on soldier art tells how camp interiors can be improved'. Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library. Gift of A. Brockie Stevenson, 1994.

¹⁹ *Interior Design and Soldier Art*. Prepared by Special Services Division, Army Service Forces, War Department (Washington, D.C., 1942), introduction.

The Engineer Recruitment Training Centre (ERTC) at Fort Belvoir, Virginia was featured in the booklet. Beginning in mid-1941, an extensive and elaborate art program was established at the camp. It lasted two years until it was terminated but not before it garnered considerable publicity and praise from the art establishment and the public alike. While some of this was due to its proximity to Washington, DC and its various art galleries, it transcended the capital and was highlighted in national publications such as *Life* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. Every few weeks, a group of soldier-artists turned out six new murals, each measuring six by eight feet to adorn the drab recreation buildings. The idea was to depict every aspect of engineer combat training, from tank-traps, demolitions and camouflage, to bridge-building and road construction. Beyond this, art classes were offered to any soldier every Tuesday and Thursday evening at 7 pm.

While none of the Belvoir murals survived, an unpublished typescript compiled in March 1944 by Private Lincoln Kirstein, the future founder and General Director of the New York City Ballet, documents the project along with numerous black-and-white photographs of the artists and the murals, and this offers a detailed view into the mechanisms of a camp art program (see chapter 3). He was able to view the various murals and was tasked with writing a history of the program by Major Joseph McNeal, the Special Service Officer who was the officer in charge of the ERTC Art Project until it ended in 1943.

By the time Kirstein arrived at Belvoir, the artists with one exception had left for the various theatres or officer training, so beyond the murals themselves and some information provided by the artist, Andre Kormendi, and McNeal, he had to re-construct the project from scratch using details supplied by the painters via mail. He began by sending out letters hoping that they would reach the desired recipients. In one sent to Alfred Brockie Stevenson who was then working as an army artist in England, Kirstein wrote:

I do wish you would write me as much you care to about the whole project. I did not come to Belvoir until everything was shut up. I've worked hard now for some time and feel I know something about how things were done but need your help badly. I have dates of the murals, etc., but I'd like to have your own ideas on your own work – particularly just how you thought of the Tanks, how long you thought about each before painting, ideas about your color, composition, etc.[...]. What would have been your next piece if the project had not closed? I hope if I can get the book printed, that it will help revive the art projects in all camps.¹⁹

¹⁹ Letter to A. Brockie Stevenson dated August 30, 1943, Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library; donated by Stevenson in 1994. Similar correspondence between

Stevenson responded with some background to which Kirstein was most appreciative as he expressed in a V-Mail to the artist dated September 21, 1943. He also described other related developments:

We are having a little show of the mural sketches at a Washington open air art fair. Just to show the museum people in town how good the best stuff was so that they may be interested in having a show at the National Gallery or somewhere, at the same time as the Life article with the color plates appear. Please write if you possibly can about what you are now doing and where as long as dear censor permits, but just so that I have some dope how your present work ties up with the Fort Belvoir project if it at all does which I doubt.²⁰

Kirstein and Charles Shannon, another of the Belvoir artists is in the possession of his widow, Mrs. Eugenie Shannon of Montgomery, Alabama.

²⁰ V-Mail from Pvt. Lincoln Kirstein to Pfc. A. Brockie Stevenson, September 21, 1943. Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library. Gift of Alfred Brockie Stevenson, 1994.

Kirstein worked on several drafts for a book to be entitled *The Art of the Engineer* but shipped out to Europe in June 1944 and it was never published. Fortunately the various typescripts, photographs, and correspondence with several of the soldier-artists, allow us to reconstruct this impressive art project.²¹

What kinds of iconography were the recruits exposed to? While many of the easel paintings had limited exposure beyond small in-house exhibits, the murals that adorned the buildings were highly visible, and while few still exist, enough information survives from photographs, published images, and extant murals to evaluate the various themes.²² Some murals were heroic and patriotic in nature and focused on the history of the United States Army including one painted in a service club at Fort Meade depicting the Battle of Gettysburg which took six months to complete and was dedicated on October 14, 1943.²³ General Andrew Jackson at the

²¹ Typescript, letters, photographs, and newspaper clippings. Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection. Gift of Alfred Brockie Stevenson, 1994. Another typescript and additional photographs are in the possession of Mrs. Eugenie Shannon.

²² Beyond pictures in magazines, several publications were devoted entirely to the genre of ‘soldier art’ including *Art in the Armed Forces pictured by men in action*, ed. by Aimée Crane (New York, 1944); and *Soldier Art*, (Washington, D.C., 1945).

²³ Alan H. Archambault, ‘World War II murals at Fort George G. Meade,’ *Military Collector and Historian*, XXXIX, No. 4 (1987), 166-7. Another mural by McWilliams depicts the American war effort during the Second World War.

Battle of New Orleans, painted on the wall of the Recreation Hall at Keesler Field, was described as one of the most popular of all the murals at the base; while at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, Lew Davis painted a five panel mural in the Black Officers' Mess entitled *The Negro in America's Wars*.²⁴ A more contemporary scene was created by Sergeant Dean Ryerson at the Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, Oklahoma in 1943. This massive mural painted on an interior wall of a large wood-framed building included a foreground of three helmeted and shirtless young soldiers in partial combat gear. M-1 carbines hang from the shoulders of two of them. The words 'Duty Honor Country' and 'As We Follow The Guidon' are painted on banners above and below the three figures.²⁵ This mural is still extant.

The vast majority of the paintings focused on life in the army, from the trials of the naïve recruits, K.P. [Kitchen Patrol] duties, early morning route marches, and convoys. Others focused on training and reinforced the experiences familiar to the recruits from their daily regimen. One massive tempera-on-wallboard triptych in the

²⁴ *Art of the Soldier*, 23. The Davis mural, which is now at the Howard University Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C, is reproduced in *Built by WPA CCC 1933-1943. New Deal Historic Resources on Department of Defense Installations*. (Washington, D.C. Department of Defense, n. d.).

²⁵ Joe C. Freeman and William Rushing. *Documentation of Mural, Building 4720. U. S. Army Field Artillery Center, Fort Sill Military Reservation, Oklahoma* (Plano, Texas, 1995), 4.

Service Club at Keesler portrayed a color guard, mechanics working on the engine of a fighter plane, while a striking mural by Sergeant James Tupper showed the side-view of a massive bomber.

Some artists depicted warfare in a more direct manner although none had yet experienced combat. In fact, a number of the pictures were created even before America entered the war. They could only imagine what the war was like from photographs in publications and newsreels shown in the cinemas. The only difference in these rather generic interpretations of war was the addition of color and the lack of reference to any specific event. For example, at Camp Barkeley, headquarters of the 90th Infantry Division, Corporal Smith was assigned to paint, three or four typical groups of 90th Division small units “in action.”²⁶ The results were described as ‘Modern War Depicted’ and hung in the Service Club, ‘and thus are subjected to the severest critics in the world – the hundreds of infantrymen who visit the club’.²⁷

²⁶ Memorandum dated June 29, 1942 from Colonel Finch, Commanding Officer, Camp Barkeley, to Colonel Eustis L. Poland, Chief of Staff, 90th Infantry Division. Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library. Gift of Samuel Smith, 1994.

²⁷ ‘Soldier art to be shown. Tea opens exhibit Sunday at T.F.W.C.’ Unidentified contemporary newspaper clipping. Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library. Gift of Samuel Smith, 1994.

Other scenes were designed to make the soldiers feel at home or provide a calming atmosphere and distraction from the rigors of the training ground. On the walls of the Third Regiment Chapel at the Infantry Replacement Center, Fort McClellan, Alabama, Sergeant Robert N. Blair executed a large full-color mural depicting the Sermon on the Mount, while at Keesler Field, a mural by Corporal Claude Marks in the dining room of the Officer's Club depicted the harvesting and processing of cane sugar in Louisiana around 1859.²⁸

It is difficult to determine whether the stated goals of the camp art programs were achieved. There is no denying that the multifarious stark wooden buildings were much improved by the addition of colorful military paintings, and that the soldiers were surrounded 'with a cheerful and attractive environment, reflecting the traditions, accomplishments and high standards of Army Life'.²⁹ The Army was attempting to instill discipline and control, which were essential to the foundations of artistic process, and the evening classes certainly reinforced this. But estimating

²⁸ *The Art Digest*, Vol. 17, No. 10 (February 15, 1943), 12. Like the other murals at Keesler Army Airfield, now Keesler Air Force Base, this piece no longer exists but is reproduced in *Art of the Soldier*, 25.

²⁹ Clipping from *Special Service Digest*, 1943 entitled 'Book on soldier art tells how camp interiors can be improved'. Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library. Gift of Alfred Brockie Stevenson, 1994.

the success of the other goals is more problematic. While the soldiers stationed at the various camps could relate to many of the pictures hanging on the walls, it is questionable whether the decorations really did ‘impress upon the mind such object lessons as the importance of camouflage, military behavior, dress, etc’.³⁰ The hope of the Special Service Officers and the camp commanders that the murals would ‘produce an atmosphere that will be conducive to the development of *esprit de corps*, a spirit of sacrifice and a will to win’,³¹ cannot be substantiated. Whether this was attained or not is unknown but the military iconography presented to young men who had never witnessed life in the military before let alone the experience of war, cannot have failed to impress them, consciously or unconsciously. The murals may have reinforced what they were experiencing on the training grounds and offered them a stimulating and exciting pictorial environment.

Such martial imagery, much of it non-violent in nature, may have facilitated a visual transition to army life for many young recruits. Paintings of muscular soldiers expressing power and might such as the three bare-chested men painted by Sergeant Ryerson at Fort Sill, must have had profound effects on them, offering role-models, albeit two dimensional, which to aspire. The transforming power of military dress cannot be underestimated and the paintings may well have contributed in

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

helping to transition civilians into soldiers by creating a unique masculinity. Yet these murals also mythologized the war providing an artificial, glamourized and sanitized impression. That was not necessarily a bad thing for morale and the recruits certainly had more than enough exposure to photographs and films of the fighting.

What of the impact of the art schemes on the artists themselves? The close visual examination of the martial experience possibly eased the transition from civilian to military life. Some had already worked with the WPA programs on Depression-era murals so it was a natural progression. For younger naïve and excited artists, it was a brave new world to arrive in a training camp only to find that art was alive and well. They had the freedom to choose their subjects and it offered a learning experience for them and an integration into the life of a soldier.

Data on the impact of the ‘Art for the Army’ camp schemes on the recruits is unavailable and no formal surveys were apparently undertaken to gage the effectiveness of the programs. Beyond articles in the press, it is impossible to know the full extent such paintings and murals had on the overall morale of the young soldiers in creating unit loyalty or imbuing a martial spirit and a sense of camaraderie. The Librarian of the Post Service Club at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where the exhibits included both military and non-military scenes and photographs, estimated that,

fifty or sixty percent of the men who used the service club took note of the exhibits and commented in passing, about twenty-five percent being particularly interested. A Lieutenant-Colonel's guess was approximately ten percent particularly interested, with about twenty-five who would like to see the exhibits continue [...]. Among those who commented, it was pretty generally conceded that the men shied off any exhibits which looked "like an attempt to educate them" [...]. There may be a danger in being too intent on getting anything else across except that art is a natural and nice thing to have around. There aren't ten soldiers in a hundred at Bragg who ever heard of 'composition' or 'space', or the word 'relation' for anything but uncles and aunts, but there are fifty who have unsuspected ability to appreciate such things.³²

A major in the morale office noted that the exhibits were attracting considerable interest not only among the soldiers but also civilian visitors. Many recruits were intrigued by watching the artists at work and on one occasion at Camp Davis, North Carolina, soldiers formed a huge semi-circle while a mural was being painted, one exclaiming, 'That's me over there – I'm the fuse cutter'. On another occasion, an

³² *Magazine of Art*, 35, No. 1 (1942), p. 42.

artilleryman corrected an artist: ‘That guy ain’t holding that shell right; he’s gonna get his fingers cut off’.³³ Captain John Sackas, an expert on morale from the Office of the Chief of Special Services, felt that such examples created a better sense of camaraderie and teamwork, seeing themselves in the mural. ‘Very few soldiers can or care to talk about esthetic subject. However, give them something in the way of art that will hold their interest, and they will take more pride in their camp surroundings’.³⁴

One noticeable achievement of the soldier-art projects was the public support they received. Organizations from the government down to small art societies, and from major national publications to small-town newspapers, wholly embraced the programs through financial contributions, exhibitions and competitions.³⁵ They recognized the importance of the art in the overall war effort and many civilian institutions were eager to showcase the work of soldier-artists. For example, the Abilene Museum of Fine Arts close to Camp Barkeley, Texas, held an exhibition of twelve paintings by Corporal Smith in February 1943; they were also exhibited for

³³ *Life*, July 6, 1942, p. 30.

³⁴ Quoted in the camp newspaper, *Belvoir Castle*, July 15, 1942.

³⁵ *Yank Magazine* actually held a competition for the best GI murals in 1943; see *Yank*, October 29, 1943, p. 19. The winning entry was an 11 x 2 meter mural in the cafeteria at Camp Bowie, Texas, painted by Private Sydney P. Knowlton depicting American troops in North Africa.

two weeks at the Texas Federation of Women's Clubs, where 'the Austin public [was] invited to call to meet Corp. Smith and view his canvasses'.³⁶ Similarly at Raleigh, North Carolina, the State Art Society sponsored a show of pictures by twenty-five soldier-artists from Fort Bragg in December 1942.³⁷ By all accounts, such events were popular. It is also significant to note how the military establishment itself, not one to normally encourage such peripheral practices, saw the validity of soldier-art as a means of improving morale and contributing to the creation of soldiers. The actions of many camp commanders and Special Service Officers certainly contributed to the overall success of the projects. However, in April 1943, general orders were issued to strip the whole military machine of all activities not completely contributing to the war effort. By then many of the artists were already in Europe or elsewhere.

With the end of the war in 1945 came the peace dividend – vastly reduced armed forces and the de-commissioning of hundreds of temporary bases, many of which were bulldozed; other recreation halls and service clubs met a similar fate over the coming decades. The soldier-artists had gone their separate ways after

³⁶ *Abilene Museum of Fine Arts presents Military Paintings by Cpl. Samuel D. Smith*, (Abilene, 1942); 'Soldier art to be shown', unidentified clipping from Abilene newspaper, Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection.

³⁷ *An Exhibition of Paintings by Soldier-Artists of the Field Artillery Replacement Center, Fort Bragg* (Raleigh, 1942).

returning home and gave little thought to the fate of their artwork. Some had had the foresight however to realize the temporary nature of the buildings even during the war. As early as November 1943, Private Horace Day of the 86th Infantry Division who had painted a series of six panels portraying ‘G.I.’ music in the Music Room of the Service Club No. 2 at Camp Howze, Texas, had made his concerns felt about the future of his murals. A memorandum of November 20, 1943 stated that ‘Pvt. Day would like to have the ownership and responsibility for the security of the murals established both at the present time and later when the Service Club ceases to function’.³⁸ In October 1945 when Camp Howze was placed on inactive status, the murals were removed and forwarded to him in Virginia.

The camp art programs were a remarkable achievement bringing together disparate groups in wartime to support soldier-artists in recognition of their contribution to the war effort. What was conceived merely as a way to decorate buildings and as a recreational after-hours activity developed into a full-blown Army-sponsored art program in over fifty training camps. Participants ranged from very young artists with few years of training to established professionals and in most cases received active support and encouragement from their camp commanders. The

³⁸ *Memorandum on Mural Painting. Service Club No. 2, Camp Howze, Texas, November 20, 1943* – typescript in Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library. Gift of H. Talmage Day. Two of the oil on canvas murals are now in the Military Collection.

art classes offered to the recruits in the evenings provided an escape from basic training.

Few of the murals survived the war. The artists had moved on to more peaceful pursuits and few gave any thought to their preservation. Besides the handful saved along with several found buried beneath subsequent layers of paint and plaster or in storage, these unique vestiges along with photographs and descriptions in the press offer a glimpse of this long-forgotten art from a crucial time in American history.