

## *‘Art of the American Soldier’ at Constitution Center*

### Military art: Not an oxymoron after all

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Lea's "2,000-Yard Stare": What the camera misses.

Since World War I, more than a thousand U.S. soldiers have recorded life in the armed forces through some 15,000 paintings. More than 200 of these have been assembled in the National Constitution Center's current show. Images of military conflict and casualties are fraught subjects in the U.S. Yet although this exhibit was created in partnership with the U.S. Army, I've rarely seen an art exhibition with such a span of subjects, stories, style and tone.

Its windows into military life are fascinating. A Vietnam-era piece shows drying laundry strung alongside a resting tank: Soldiers could rarely count on being stationary long enough to wash and dry their clothes.

Other paintings demonstrate life's little luxuries on the warfront despite the risks: *Soldier Bathing* (1944) shows a blissful man in an outdoor bathtub heated by a lit gas-can. In *Military*

*Necessity* (Normandy, 1944), a roiling sky behind a massive cross befits any Baroque crucifixion scene, but a closer look reveals that the religious edifice is draped with countless radio wires.

Artist Elzie Golden produces images of sleeping soldiers in Iraq. Though their jackets, canteens, helmets and guns remain nearby, the slumbering men stand out with a simple yet exquisite vulnerability.

The paintings depict mealtimes, mail deliveries, bathing, worshipping and, yes, battle. But a grouping of paintings dedicated to soldiers' transportation has perhaps the widest range of atmospheres.

### **Carrying crutches**

In one painting, a line of tanks diminishes into a gritty desert haze, while *Jungle Trail* shows a tortuous climb afoot up a New Guinea slope. The soldiers' loads tell another poignant story: They are struggling toward a hospital site, the crutches they carry reminding us that worse hardships wait at the trail's end.

In another arresting contrast, grimy soldiers huddle like sardines in a truck bed under a dirt-brown canvas in *Troop Movement* (1942), while the soldiers in a 1990 piece by Al Sprague seem to relax in an expansive, cottony light, watching the Panama Canal from a Chinook helicopter.

A few of the most similar images come from Vietnam. In Brian Clark's *Chopper Pickup* (1968) or John Wehrle's *Landing Zone* (1966), solitary soldiers seem adrift in vegetation, while the helicopters could be giant, indifferent insects perched in the grasses.

### **Absent women**

As a woman, I couldn't help noticing that the images chosen had nearly all male subjects, captured almost exclusively by male artists. A few tiny women do appear here and there in the background— a nurse in a hospital tent, a barefoot mother in the rubble. But perhaps the only painting in the entire exhibit to focus on a female subject is Robert Benny's *Night Vigil* (1944), in

which a nurse keeps charts on a hospital train.

Given the era and setting of most of these works, perhaps this is understandable. But out of a touted archive of 15,000 works, could more female subjects or artists have been found?

A few female painters do contribute to this exhibit, but only in its most recent era. I wonder: Will a female perspective— whether soldier or civilian— ever be a featured part of our military history?

### **Confronting death**

The exhibit contains plenty of razed landscapes, but I wondered if "Art of the American Soldier" would sanitize or neglect that most difficult of wartime images: dead or wounded soldiers or civilians. Then I came to a section titled "A Soldier's Sacrifice," headed by *The Man Without a Gun* (1944), which depicts a young medic standing helplessly among piles of boots, helmets and bloodied bandages.

Other images show a leg splinted with a gun, and a stark charcoal sketch of a dead medic. In *Marines Call It That 2,000-Yard Stare* (above), artist Tom Lea examines the mental wounds of combat in the Pacific during World War II. Death looks unbearably lonely in a 1945 work by Howard Brodie showing a single departed soldier slumping from a foxhole, while the rows of white-wrapped bodies underscore the magnitude of war's tragedy in Ogden Pleissner's *Casualties* (1944).

### **Vanishing breed**

The exhibit notes the number of artists commissioned for each major conflict, beginning with eight in World War I and rising as high as 57 in Vietnam. Perhaps it's no coincidence that when the U.S. government banned media images of soldiers' coffins early in the Iraq War, the number of commissioned military artists dropped to four. Now, just three army artists have been commissioned for all of Iraq and Afghanistan.

As an introductory video notes, the use of paintings to document even contemporary wars no longer concerns capturing battlefield images; it's about bringing the artist's perspective to the

battlefield. Unlike most art exhibits, this one isn't bound by aesthetic themes. Nevertheless it succeeds in the most important role art can play. In an age when we're increasingly shielded from the realities of America's modern wars, it's especially important to engage with the ideas that soldiers' art can provoke.