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Spanning the globe

Paquette's work sees the world through Art In Embassies program

By STACEY GROSS

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In the year 2000, the year of the “hanging chads” during the presidential election, Warren artist Thomas Paquette had work hanging in Chad.

N'Djamena, Chad, that is.

In 1994, Paquette, who had work in a show in Washington, was approached by one of the curators of the Art In Embassies program, an outreach by the U.S. Department of State, with a “mission of vital cross-cultural dialogue and understanding through the visual arts and dynamic artist exchange,” according to the program’s website.

A vision of the Modern Museum of Art in 1953, the program was formalized by John F. Kennedy in 1963. Today, the public and private partnership includes over 20,000 participants across the globe each year, “including artists, museums, galleries, universities, and private collectors, and encompasses over 200 venues in 189 countries,” the website states.

About 60 exhibitions go out each year, including over 58 permanent collections installed in diplomatic facilities worldwide.

In total, Paquette has had 18 Art In Embassies exhibitions, spanning 22 years and including works sent to Chad, Latvia, Italy, Russia, Austria, Taiwan, Cambodia, Athens, Cuba, San Salvador, Brazzaville, Guyana, Jordan, Gabon, and Lithuania. His work has been to both Moscow and St. Petersburg in Russia, and Athens twice. His piece titled “Landmark Tree,” a 46 by 36 oil on linen, became part of the permanent collection of the United States Department of State in 2012 and hangs in Libreville, Gabon. His most requested piece, “Spring Birches,” a 40 by 50 oil on canvas, has been deployed three times since 1998. It went to the U.S. Embassy in Santiago, Chile from 1998 to 2001, the U.S. Embassy in St. Petersburg, Russia, from 2002 to 2005, and the United States Interest Section in Havana, Cuba, in 2006.

According to Paquette, curators of the program work with incoming ambassadors and sometimes their spouses and families to gather a collection of work by American artists that both showcases American artwork and appeals to the ambassadors aesthetically. Generally, he said, work tends to be hung for four years, the length of an ambassador’s term. Ambassadors can also identify works they’d like to have showcased in their embassies, Paquette said.

It’s a long trip, and Paquette said the process of simply getting his work to the embassies where they’re intended to hang can be fraught with unexpected mishaps. The work he sent to Cuba, he said, was at a time when political turbulence between America and Cuba was high. The pieces were kept on a boat offshore and denied entry to Cuba for over a year.

Asked whether it made him nervous to have his work in such uncertain states during the shipping process, Paquette laughed. “They’re insured,” he said.

While he’s not sure whether he’s the artist that’s been borrowed from the most, Paquette said he did bring up with a curator at one point that they’d been requesting his work a lot. “Is it common,” he asked the curator, to have work borrowed several times over the course of two decades? The curator answered that it was “uncommon,” he said for work to be requested from the same artist more than once or twice.

His first works, the five paintings Paquette sent to Chad, wound up being held over.

“They were about two years overdue to come back,” said Paquette, so he contacted the curator to find out what the situation was. “I thought they were lost in Chad,” he said.

The curator answered that they just liked them and decided to keep them a while longer.

While just having artwork hanging abroad is an exciting accomplishment for any artist, Paquette said he’s had the opportunity to actually see some of his work on display in the embassies to which they’ve been sent. Since part of the goal of the program is to foster “U.S. relations with local communities worldwide,” according to the website, over the past 10 years over 100 of the Art In Embassies program artists have traveled to participating countries through Art In Embassies exchange programs, producing collaborative work with local artists.

According to his artist’s bio on the Art In Embassies website, “He presented lectures around Greece when his paintings were installed at the U.S. embassy Athens in 2006, and at other times gave talks at the University of Wales in Cardiff, and at Plymouth College in Exeter, England, as well as a few colleges in the U.S.”

Also, it says, “In 2007, the book Thomas Paquette: Gouaches was published to accompany a traveling museum exhibition of his gouache paintings.”

When asked, Paquette said that probably what makes his work so often requested is its subject. Paquette focuses heavily on national parks in his work and, he said, “the themes show off America. It’s what America is. It’s such a fantastic land, and lands, that we have, that we’re really proud of. We really,” he said, “have a great national park system. Many of our national parks have become models for parks abroad,” he said.

Paquette said the program has given him an opportunity to learn about the places he sends work.

“It gets me looking at the places,” he said, adding that with his work on the way to Lithuania, he’s done some research on Vilnius. “It’s a really well-preserved European city,” he said. “It might be fun to try to go to Lithuania, check it out.”

And with his work having been on display on every continent with the exception of Australia and Antarctica, he’s had plenty of opportunity to research and travel the world.

Learn more about Thomas Paquette by visiting his website at thomas-paquette.com.



Photo submitted for publication

“Between Voyages” will hang Vilnius, Lithuania until 2020.



Photo submitted for publication

“Birches Enveloped III” hangs in the Ambassador’s residence in Moscow, Russia.



Photo submitted for publication

“Late Vermilion Light” (left) and “High Land Summer” (right) hang in the Ambassador’s residence in Moscow.