

Thursday, April 27, 1989

Art from behind the walls

Inmates create art within Huntsville prison

Photos by Mike C. Mulvey

By Keith Spera

REVIEWER

Some of the inmates in the Texas Department of Corrections' prison system can take trips to the mountains whenever they want.

If they choose, they can be visited by friends or relatives in their cells.

In fact, they are free to see whomever they want or to go anywhere in the world — as long as it is done through their art.

Since the Windham School System was established in 1968 to provide educational and vocational classes for Texas' prisoners, art classes have given prisoners the opportunity to develop their creativity.

Molly Campbell, the art instructor at the Huntsville Unit (which is nicknamed "The Walls," because of the high red brick walls that surround the prison), conducts six one-hour art classes each weekday. Between 10 and 20 students attend each class.

Some of the Huntsville Unit's art students are not required to attend classes, either because they have attained a certain reading level or they have a GED. Otherwise, the inmate must go to school.

School involves three hours of classes and an additional hour of either art or gym, whichever the inmate prefers. "This causes us to have a lot of beginning art students who

chose art because they didn't want to work out in the gym," Campbell said with a grin.

The atmosphere of the prison art classes is noticeably different from those conducted outside prison walls. Classes are always under the watchful eyes of a prison guard or two, although Campbell says that in the eight years she has been teaching in The Walls, she has never had a serious disciplinary incident in any of her classes.

Prison instructors generally do not get to know their students on a first-name basis, because they must address their pupils by their last names, such as "Inmate Smith."

"It's a matter of maintaining a teacher/student relationship, and not having an overly friendly relationship," Campbell said. "You maintain

"I personally, as a teacher, try to start them wherever they are and go from there. With some people, if they're here long enough, you can develop their taste in different directions, or maybe they'll be more willing to try to express themselves, instead of being copyists."

— Molly Campbell, art instructor

your position as a teacher. It's true for officers as well as teachers. It's a matter of respect."

Instructors usually do not know anything about their students' crimes and sentences. Campbell says that sometimes her students will feel like telling her why they are in jail, but for the most part, they want to keep that information to themselves.

"A lot of times they tell me that they think I won't like them if I know why (they're in prison)," she



Drawing by Patrick Arnold

"Hands"

said.

The prison setting prevents the students from using certain materials in their art. Campbell said that for a while, her students were prevented from using some kinds of ink pens, because inmates would steal them and use them to make tattoos.

She also said that painting on handkerchiefs was popular for a while, but those could be taken as well and used by the inmates to barter with one another, which sometimes led to fights. The handkerchiefs, too, had to be banned for some time.

Campbell said that many prison art students have different goals for their art than do art students in the outside world. Rather than developing an individual style of art or making paintings or drawings of things they make up in their heads, many prison artists want to be literal with their art.

"When new students come in, I ask them, 'What is your goal, what do you want to be able to do?' and they'll say 'I want to be able to draw what I see,'" Campbell said. "I say, 'OK, we'll start there.'"

"I personally, as a teacher, try to start them wherever they are and go from there. With some people, if they're here long enough, you can develop their taste in different directions, or maybe they'll be more willing to try to express themselves, instead of being copyists."

The inmates often want to learn to do a specific type of realist painting — portraits, she said.

"They all want to do portraits — they want to do their mother and their brother and their children, and they want to do other people so they can make money," she said. "I don't know why, but portraits are the big thing."

"You won't see many portraits here (on display at Wynne Unit of the TDC), since a picture of someone else's momma isn't going to sell, unless she's a real neat-looking character," Campbell said.

Some inmates send portraits to the show along with the picture the painting was based on. Generally a note is attached to these works, indicating that the inmate artist is interested in taking orders to do other portraits.

Customers interested in commissioning an inmate to do a portrait may place their order at the upcoming Art Show.

Only a few artists do what is known as "prison art" — scenes depicting life behind bars, she said. From an economic standpoint, that fact is surprising, she said, because many of the people attending the art shows are interested in buying prison art.

"But most of them (inmates) would prefer to paint and forget prison, and do landscapes and places they'd rather be," she said.

Several themes show up at the art show each year. At last year's show, many of the artists submitted works dealing with Indians, other western themes, and a lot of nature scenes, said Dr. Alice Fisher, art coordinator for the Windham School System.

She also said that clown drawings,

which are popular with the people who buy the art, often are featured at the shows. "What I'm finding is that those pieces that sell from year to year, that's what they continue to do," Fisher said.

Apparently, the prisoners know their market, because Fisher estimates that about 75 percent of the art is sold each year.

Many of the pieces on display at this year's show are nature and outdoors scenes, but the range of topics is endless. With almost 800 pieces of art submitted by 106 inmate artists, most tastes are covered.

There are portraits of everyone from Donald Duck and Thumper Rabbit to Marilyn Monroe, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert E. Lee.



Painting by Charli Miller

Besides oil and acrylic paintings, there are pastels, watercolors, pen and ink and pencil drawings, and crafts that include crochet and small stained-glass pieces.

The work of individual artists can be dissimilar. Inmate Charli Miller of the Terrace 3-A Unit, who signs his works "Charli 'Bad to the Bone' Miller," had a series of paintings on display that depicted a skull in flames, a lady on a dragon, and a Medusa figure. Next to these works was a painting of a beaming clown.

The inspirations and reasons behind their works can vary, too. Campbell said inmates often get involved with art in prison because they did not have time for it in the outside world.

"In prison, they get involved with things they didn't have time for on the outside — art, religion, and writing — mostly letters," she said. "That doesn't mean they stay with it when they leave."

Santiago Patino, one of Campbell's students in The Walls, had several paintings of Elvis Presley on sale, some for as much as \$65. He says he plans to continue with his art once he gets out.

In an essay he wrote to accompany some of his art at a show last year, Patino explained why much of his art deals with Elvis: "I guess ELVIS has been a big influence on my life. To me ELVIS is still the king and I know he will live in the hearts of many of us forever. I like to wear white shoes like ELVIS and dress a little like him. ELVIS PRESLEY has

always been a superstar to me, and I admire him very much."

Another of Campbell's students, John Ellis, created paintings of outdoor mountain scenes with a man chopping wood. Campbell said that Ellis told her that these scenes were of where he wanted to be and of things he wanted to do. He didn't copy the scenes from a picture; he made them up.

Walls artist Truman Moffett wrote this about his art: "To me, art is three whole different things. One is a personal, expression sort of a thing; one is portraits and one is income type art. Not many people see my personal art, even though it's what I am most involved in. It's mostly surrealistic, dream-like pieces."

For the past 16 years, the Windham System has put on an Art Show and Sale that features works by inmate artists.

"It was started in an effort to get (inmate) students not only some type of therapeutic interchange with their creativity, but also, we began to encourage them to do this as a means to earn a little money that they could put in their inmate trust funds," Fisher said.

The artists who submit works set the price for each of their art pieces based on the amount of work that went into it, she said. All the money from the sales (except for sales tax) goes into the inmate artists' personal accounts. An inmate can use the money in his account to buy supplies, send it to someone outside the prison, or leave it deposited until he is released.

The art show and sale originally was part of the annual prison rodeo, but because the rodeo no longer takes place, the art show has evolved into an event of its own.

Eleven prison units from around the state submitted art for this year's show. Much of the artwork comes from the Huntsville Unit of the TDC prison system.

This year's show and sale will be May 6 from 9 a.m. - 4 p.m. in the Windham School Administration Building at the Wynne prison unit in Huntsville.



Painting by Santiago Patino



Drawing by Patrick Arnold

"Alcoholic"



Drawing by Mill Lee

"Cat sitting on a pole"



Photo by Mike C. Mulvey

Molly Campbell, art instructor for the Huntsville Unit of the Texas Department of Corrections, shows a sample of inmate H.R. Clark's

art in the Windham School System's administration building.