AirSpace Season 4, Episode 7: Art Decade

intro music up and under

Nick:

Welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Nick.

Matt:

I'm Matt.

Emily:

And I'm Emily.

Matt:

NASA's job is space exploration, but for decades, starting in the early 1960s, NASA was also in the business of commissioning art to document the wonder of that space exploration.

Nick:

Hundreds of artists were given commissions and access to NASA sites and events to document space exploration in their own ways. From launch pads, to clean rooms, to laboratories, the artists of the NASA Art Program saw it all.

Emily:

And some of the thousands of works of art created over the nearly 50 years made it into the museum's collection. We're walking through the years and talking to the artists of the NASA Art Program, today on AirSpace.

music up and out

Nick:

So the NASA Art Program and the National Air and Space Museum are a little bit entwined. A lot of the NASA Art Program output came to the museum and is now in the collection. And some of the figures worked in both the art program and in the museum. So just at the top, we're kind of enmeshed in this story. This is a family story for the museum in a lot of ways.

Matt:

Yeah. And I think it's also in some ways a behind-the-scenes story, because not many people know that we actually have this gigantic art collection at the National Air and Space Museum, and that we have art by modern artists that they've probably heard of and seen in contemporary art museums, and don't know that they can also see that art when we have it on display in our art gallery portion of the Air and Space Museum.

Nick:

And one painting that I have seen in our collection is actually the one that kicked off the entire program. It's the story of how the NASA Art Program came to be, is that the NASA Administrator James Webb saw a painting by the artist Bruce Stevenson, that he did of Al Shepard. This was in the early 1960s. And he thought that the painting was so spectacular that they should engage American artists to document the space program. That was kind of the short premise of it.

Emily:

Right. So in the spring of 1962, James Webb sent out a memo asking NASA employees to think about what NASA should do in the field of fine arts to communicate past historic events, such as Shepard's first flight into space and Glenn's first orbit around the earth, as well as future historic events that we know will come to pass.

Matt:

Plans were made, and the U.S. Fine Arts Commission got involved. Then James Dean, who was working in the NASA Public Affairs Office, was appointed the director of the program. He went to the National Gallery of Art to enlist their help. Lester Cooke from the Gallery jumped on the project and he and Dean got to work identifying and commissioning artists.

Emily:

Right. So I think what's really cool is that the sort of early years of the art program also coincide with the early years of the space program, right around the Gemini and Apollo launches. And so NASA ended up commissioning hundreds of artists, but it wasn't just artists you've never heard of, right? At the time, it was artists that you would recognize even today, like Andy Warhol and Norman Rockwell, which I was super surprised by, because I love Norman Rockwell and I had no idea he painted for the space program. But there were other artists that are really well-known, like Jamie Wyeth, who comes from a long tradition of artists in his family.

Jamie Wyeth:

It really was my father who was first approached, Andrew Wyeth.

Nick:

So Lester Cooke actually called Andrew Wyeth "the top working artist in the United States today," and luckily for everyone, who's a fan of Jamie's paintings, his dad, Andrew.

Jamie Wyeth:

He said that he was too old for that sort of stuff. And so he deferred it to me and said, "Would you be interested?

Nick:

My 19-year old son might be interested in participating in this project.

Jamie Wyeth:

And so I thought it sounded fascinating. So it was sort of something that he handed off to me.

Emily:

So the artists who were commissioned by NASA, weren't given an enormous amount of money to do this work, but they were given major access to NASA facilities. And so they were given all this opportunity to go visit spaces that your average person wouldn't have access to, but they weren't given any restrictions in terms of what they should paint or how they should paint it.

Jamie Wyeth:

That's the extraordinary thing. They had no kind of... They said, "We just want you to see it. And, and hopefully you'll record it in your genre and your whichever way you paint," and so forth. But no, there was no sort of direction, no sort of... It was really an open book. Just have the experience. I met various pilots, the astronauts, and whatnot, not the ones on the mission, they were sort of in isolation, of course. So they were incredibly open and wanting me to see everything, which was great. And largely that was due, I think, to Jim Dean, who was the NASA coordinator, who had dealt with other painters before and whatnot on this program. So it was really fashioned that we would have sort of an open book, which was great.

Matt:

And an interesting tidbit to this is they were given that incredible access, but it wasn't, it didn't come along with sort of first-class accommodation. A lot of the times they were riding alongside all of the workforce that was on their way to the launch pad. They were accompanying equipment as it was being transported. They were actually living with the space program, not just sort of visiting and staying in nice hotels.

Nick:

Yeah. There's the modest commission. But then the major access is really the story of the program, particularly in those early days. They were given kind of top-secret level clearance and access to these really, really sensitive areas. And in some cases, they were not quite given equipment, but like Norman Rockwell was lent a space suit so that he could take it into his studio and paint it in the kind of extreme detail that he's known for as a painter and an illustrator.

And I don't want to put a number to it, particularly in 1960s money, but spacesuits aren't cheap when you start talking about the real thing, particularly during the early days of the active space program.

Emily:

And the access the artists were given was something that the public and even journalists covering the events couldn't even dream of.

Nick:

Jamie has a great story about watching Gemini IV launch from the top of a nearby gantry. And he had to get up there in the middle of the night so that reporters wouldn't see and demand all of the same access. He tells the story better in his own words.

Jamie Wyeth:

The launch was approaching, it was to be the following day. And that night there was, of course, huge excitement. And I remember we talked late in the night, and Jim Dean, this person who worked for NASA, said, there is a possibility we may be able to get you near to the actual launch, outside. And I said,

"God, I'd be thrilled if I could be outside." And so at three in the morning, he called me, woke me up in my motel, and said, "If you go right now, we have permission to get you up on a..."

So up I went in this elevator, along with Jim Dean, and up there were various NASA officials, testing the heat shield. They had sort of heavy asbestos uniforms on. Well, of course we had nothing. I just was sitting in my regular clothes and all my painting gear and so forth. And so as dawn finally rose, I could see, down the various launch paths, there was the booster ready to be launched. And I always felt that they picked the person with the sort of slowest sort of voice and diction to do the countdown. And then the voice over the earphone said, "T minus 28 and counting." And so the whole element, it was very, very exciting. So I did a painting from that gantry.

Nick:

What was it like watching the launch from that high up and from that close? I mean, I see the painting, but

Jamie Wyeth:

It was incredible. Well, it was just, at first you see the blast before the sound reaches you. And so all of a sudden, there's incredibly strong light at the base of this thing, which is the thrusters. And then all of a sudden the sound reaches you like a thunder clap. It really was phenomenal. And then it just was a constant thunder clap as this thing finally, through the great clouds of oxygen and whatnot, you saw the nose rising. And it was incredibly exhilarating, and really something I'll never forget.

Emily:

So in the early years of the program, most of the art commissioned by NASA was two-dimensional, paintings, drawings, and sketches. In addition to being mostly painters, the artists that were commissioned early on in the program were also mostly white men. In the later years of the program, NASA started commissioning different types of art from a broader group of artists. So the collection now includes fashion design, music, and sculpture, along with the paintings and the drawings.

Nick:

And that's not to say that there weren't a huge variety of artists inspired by the space program in the 1960s and seventies. They just weren't always a part of the formal NASA Art Program.

Matt:

Right. Some of my favorite paintings that are in the museum's collection that are from around this same time, the late sixties, early seventies, were done by an African-American woman artist named Alma Thomas, who did these incredible sort of color-field paintings that were inspired by different moments in the space program, including the splashdown of Apollo XII. They're just incredibly vivid, colorful things. And she did them all from her home studio, based on what she saw on television. Because she was not one of these people who had incredible access to the actual launch sites and where space exploration was taking place.

Nick:

Yeah. And for a program whose emphasis was diversity of perspective for one of the most documented periods of human history, in the early years, they did leave out a lot of perspectives. And a lot of those voices and a lot of different artists were introduced to the program in its middle and later years. But it's

distinct in the early part of the program that it looked a lot like the Astronaut Corps, which was markedly lacking in diversity.

Emily:

As we move into the seventies, the Art Program is starting to slow down a little bit, in part because we have fewer launches and there's fewer things going on with respect to the human space program. And so there weren't as many commissions in the seventies. And when James Dean left NASA for the National Air and Space Museum in 1974, this is when he started making arrangements for the NASA art collection to be transferred to the care of the brand new Air and Space Museum.

Nick:

So, as you mentioned, this is one of the places where the story kind of overlaps between our organizations. In the 1970s, a huge amount of the output of the program came to NASM, and makes up a huge amount of our art collection at the museum. But the program continued in the 1980s and 1990s, and there were still works being produced that are not necessarily in our collection.

Matt:

Over the years, the artists and the art changed. And so too did the culture within NASA itself. The program Jamie Wyeth experienced looked one way-

Jamie Wyeth:

At one point, I said, "Can I go into the control room?" And of course, here I'd been doing things outside in the gantries and so forth. So I got a clearance and, in I went. Well, of course the control room is a sterile environment of all these sort of automaton humans staring at these screens, these television screens, monitors, and each had a particular part of the launch. I mean, one dealt with some bolt, another dealt with some wire, and so forth. All these screens were blinking. It was sort of something out of Metropolis or something. And and I say it's least like my art, my usual painting, but I wanted to record it. It was sort of this sterile environment where this thing, the life of this thing, really was going on. So it's an unlike-Wyeth painting of mine, but I'm happy I experienced it.

Nick:

It's kind of the stereotypical 1960s idea of “steely-eyed missile men” in this control room where the overall tint is blue from the lights of all of the monitors. And it just kind of feels like a humming center of activity, but also very mechanical. It's a living, breathing painting of what it's like to keep machines alive. It doesn't have a lot of human elements to it, despite there being dozens of people in the painting.

Emily:

Yeah. So Jamie captured the atmosphere of the kind of quintessential 1960s NASA control room. A few decades later, NASA looked very different. The sculptor E.V. Day created a piece for the NASA Art Program in 2006.

E.V. Day:

My name is E.V. Day. I am a artist and I work a lot with three-dimensional materials, mostly suspended sculptures.

Emily:

When she arrived at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, she witnessed a very different scene from Jamie's mission control experience.

E.V. Day:

Yeah. But when I went to JPL and I was going there and thinking, "Well, I'm going to speak to rocket scientists." And I was very nervous, and you get onto campus, essentially, and everyone's wearing Nikes and shorts like they've just gone on a run. Everyone's happy, everyone's smiling, everyone's talking. And it was not like the lunar-landing look with the pen-pocket white shirts, and black pants, and glasses. It was very utopian in a way to imagine, this is what the future of rocket science looks like.

Emily:

I also think that contrasting these two statements is really interesting because as the NASA Art Program evolved through time and tried to keep up with the changing human space program, I think what's really cool about these two separate perspectives on participating in the NASA Art Program is actually getting to see an outsider perspective on how the culture at NASA has really changed and evolved over time. Kind of moving away from this sort of caricature of what a NASA person looks like and moving into more of an environment where creativity is valued in a way that is celebrated now more than it used to be.

Matt:

Right. It's not the guys in short-sleeve, white shirts with narrow ties and pocket protectors, right? That stereotype of who's at mission control. Instead, it's a pretty diverse group of folks, dressed differently, each with sort of a little bit more personality showing through than that stereotype would have allowed.

Emily:

Sure. And I think a lot of that has to do with a cultural shift, right? I mean, to allow your personality to shine through isn't something that you would necessarily do unless there's a culture to allow that to happen. And so I think there's many reasons why that shift has happened, but I think it's all for the best. And I think it's really evident when you compare these two different experiences from these two different folks at two wildly different times.

Musical transition

Emily:

So E.V. Day's work for the program was three-dimensional, about robots and Martian exploration, and otherwise really different from the mission control gantries and crewed launches that early artists in the program captured.

E.V. Day:

The piece is called the Wheel of Optimism. It is made from a spare tire from the Opportunity Rover, which is this, was solid aluminum, milled-out tire. And I then transformed it into a diorama, in which the interior you would peek through, and it looks like basically the Anza-Borrego desert with the Mars landscape behind it. And the idea there was that in my research at JPL, the purpose of the Mars mission

was always around the idea of discovering water. So I imagined what Mars would look like if it had water. And it looked like, to me, it would look like the Anza-Borrego desert.

So you look through the window, which is the hole of where the axle would go, and I've covered it in hematite rocks that are similar in chemical structure or mineral structure to the iron that's on the planet Mars, and then put in plastic flora, exotic-looking flora. And then there's a photograph that is the background landscape that has been taken from the NASA site of what a landscape looks like in Mars. So you're looking at like... You can hold it in your hand, as the wheel of Opportunity. And it's this very optimistic, kind of surrealist, science-fiction diorama.

Nick:

Like the early years of the program, she was given access and carte blanche to create whatever inspired her.

E.V. Day:

They gave me a lot of freedom. They did say that it would need to be somewhat portable. And a lot of my work is site-specific, so that was at first a limitation for me. But when this engineer handed me the tire and said, "Do you think you could do something with this?" Where I had been thinking about doing something really large, something about outer space, something about moving across large distances, that I realized it had to be compact, inside this wheel, because he handed me this wheel as though it was the Holy Grail.

I mean, it was like, he looked in my eyes, he handed it to me, and he said, "You are the artist. You are going to make something that is going to make everything better." I was surprised that I was really given the power. They were looking at me as someone who is in the genius category of problem-solving, which was something that I did not imagine was going to be the conversation. But they sort of really had such great respect for artists, understanding that we turn things around and look upside down to do the kind of problem-solving and use our brains in a way that is not always the most usual way of looking at things.

Nick:

So pieces from the program are in collections and on display in a lot of places. But the original shows were at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 1963 and November of 1969, when it should be said there was no National Air and Space Museum on the National Mall at that time. But obviously we had just landed on the moon and public interest was at a fever pitch.

And in 2008, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of NASA, our museum created a traveling exhibition of 73 works from the program. And at the same time, there was a book called NASA Art: 50 years of Exploration, that contains a lot of these paintings. And there are several other publications that have spotlighted the works from the NASA Art Collection.

Emily:

And that, sort of, brings us to kind of the end of the NASA Art Program. The program slowly kind of got less and less funding, making it harder and harder to give this amount of access to artists and travel them around the country so that they can access these spaces and create these works of art. So the program was officially, sort of, ended in 2010, but there's this wonderful legacy of art left in all of the pieces that we have in our collections and kind of spread throughout the country. Because of course, to

Matt's point, there was plenty of folks who weren't involved in the NASA Art Program, who were being inspired by the exploration of space.

Nick:

The funding was never huge for the art program. And it was always kind of a lean operation in terms of personnel. I will say that the people who worked in the NASA Art Program had some of the most interesting jobs in NASA, and I think our hats off to them and we owe them a lot. Some of those people are still at NASA and NASA does still work with artists. The idea that space exploration is something that should be explored through every human medium, that still has currency. There's no formal program anymore, but NASA does still work with a lot of artists and still employs a lot of artists. There's a really wonderful office at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California called The Studio. And they produce some really incredible art, both for public outreach and that's on display just in the NASA centers. So it's still kind of a living, breathing, everyday part of NASA.

musical transition

Emily:

Right, so where is all this art now? Why do people not know about it? Why have we not seen it? Where does it go?

Nick:

That's exactly what I ask myself every day. And the answer is, there's just a lot of it. The NASA Art Program produced thousands and thousands of pieces over the decades that it was in existence, and our museum alone has thousands and thousands of pieces in the art collection, many of them from the NASA Art Program. And there's just too much to be displayed at any given time.

Matt:

Right. But it's worth pointing out that we are planning on doing more to display that art in the future. One of the things we're doing right now, that we don't talk about on this show, is we're transforming the museum and its galleries. And our new art gallery is actually going to have a space within it where parts of the permanent collection can be displayed, which includes pieces from the NASA Art collection and the gallery that I'm working on, which we're sort of now calling Future of Space Flight, but that name could change, is going to have one wall dedicated to art. And that will include some of the pieces from the NASA Art Program, as well as pieces that have been made more recently, and from places around the world, not just limited to the U.S. context. So, you know, we're trying to make that work that was produced in the sixties and seventies and eighties and nineties communicate with other work now and participate in an ongoing conversation of what space flight looks like.

Nick:

Yeah. I sometimes make a joke about how, when your museum has to display enormous airplanes and spaceships, there are just fewer and fewer walls that you can hang paintings on. But the truth is that there's just a lot of it, and it's a challenge to get everything on display that we wish was on display. But it's always been in our DNA. There was an art curator when the museum opened in the 1970s. There's always been an art gallery.

Matt:

And by the way, if you want to see an Alma Thomas painting, I mentioned her earlier in the program, you can see her work at the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, sort of across the Mall from us, where they also have some of her pieces.

Exit music up and under

Emily:

AirSpace is from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. You can follow us on Twitter or Instagram at AirSpacePod. AirSpace is produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mixed by Tarek Fouda, distributed by PRX.

Music under and out