Bataan Death March Survivor Donates Art To UM Museum

MISSOULA –

The Montana Museum of Art & Culture at The University of Montana has received a gift of 11 oil paintings and 78 drawings by noted artist Ben Steele.

Steele, a survivor of the Bataan Death March in the Philippines and a former prisoner of war in Japan, used found paper and salvaged charcoal to document his ordeal of unparalleled cruelty and savagery – 41 months of starvation, dehydration, hard labor, torture and a journey on notorious “hell ships” to the Japanese homeland.

Crippled by a combination of dysentery, pneumonia, malaria, blood poisoning and Beriberi, Steele miraculously survived before being liberated in 1945. The drawings were smuggled out of the prison camps but unfortunately were lost.

During his yearlong recuperation in a Spokane, Wash., hospital, Steele re-created the lost drawings. Following his recovery, he pursued a degree at the Cleveland Institute of Art, where he studied with noted artists George Grosz, Hans Mueller and Clarence Van Duzer. Steele later received teaching credentials from Kent State University and earned a Master of Art degree from the University of Denver in 1955.

MMAC Director Barbara Koostra recently conducted an oral history with Steele as part of the museum’s efforts to preserve the history of art in Montana.

“Ben is a treasure,” Koostra said. “His message is one of peace. We hope that people will learn a great deal about the lessons of war from his paintings.”

As part of MMAC’s Permanent Collection, the Steele paintings have recently been cleaned and conserved. MMAC will reframe the drawings using archival materials. The conservation and reframing are in preparation for an exhibition of Steele’s work titled “War Torn: The Art of Ben Steele.” Scheduled for September 2011, the exhibition will coincide with the 38th annual Montana History Conference at UM. The theme of the conference will be “Montana and War: Conflict and Resolution Under the Big Sky.”


MMAC has new, expanded hours and is open Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday from noon to 3 p.m. and Thursday and Friday from noon to 6 p.m. For more information, call 406-243-2019 or go online to http://www.umt.edu/montanamuseum.

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NOTE TO MEDIA: Digital images of select items included in the exhibition are available upon request by calling 406-243-2019.

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