



ARTS & CULTURE

For US, Art in Federal Buildings Is a Must

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Artwork has been a part of federal structures almost since the founding of the United States.

A good example is the U.S. Capitol Building with its **domed ceiling**, paintings and statues. And the Washington Monument to honor the nation's first president was completed in 1888.

Jennifer Gibson is the director of the Center for Fine Arts at the General Services Administration (GSA), the agency that supervises federal buildings. She says art in federal buildings is a record of the past and “creates a **dynamic** presence in towns and cities and border stations across the country.”

In the 1960s, a presidential committee stated that “...fine art should be **incorporated** into the designs of federal buildings with emphasis on the work of living American artists.”

Today, the government still spends about 0.5 percent of the federal budget to commission, or order, new artwork for federal spaces.

The commissions are decided by a group that includes the lead designer of the building, those who will occupy the space, community members, arts professionals, and the GSA. Artists are given details about the building project and asked to propose artwork they think is best for the space.

New York artist James Carpenter created two artworks for federal buildings. They included a ceiling for a courtroom in Phoenix, Arizona, and a **sculpture** for another courthouse in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Carpenter said, “My work is really about how to **enhance** or influence, in a very positive way, people's experience of spaces...”

For some artists, requests to provide art for federal buildings may not be related to making money. Artists can make commissions as much as \$1 million from non-government artworks. The average commission for art in federal buildings is around \$100,000. And the process can take several years, limiting an artist's ability to work on other art projects. Carpenter said the Salt Lake City project took a total of 12 years.

“They're looking at it as a way to **participate** in what's going on in the nation and to be part of its history,” Gibson says. “This is for the nation. This is permanent. We will take care of it. And it's your way to participate.”

The commissioned artworks can be found in 428 federal buildings across the country. Overall, the GSA's fine art collection contains 26,712 works, including some that date back to the 1850s.

Most of the artworks are paintings, **sculptures** and **photographs** created in the 1930s. That was the time the government employed artists during the Great Depression.

The collection belongs to the American people as a record of the history of American culture.

I'm Caty Weaver.

Dora Mekouar reported this story for Voice of America. Gena Bennett adapted it for VOA Learning English.

Words in This Story

dome -n. a shape; the top of a building that has a round shape and a circular base

ceiling -n. the top of a room

incorporate -v. include

dynamic-adj. having a lot of ideas, energy and interest

sculpture -n. a form of art in which hard materials are worked into object that has width, height, and depth

enhance -v. to increase or improve in value, quality, desirability, or attractiveness

participate -v. to have a share in something in common with others

photograph -n. images made with a camera
