

A Solid Green Mess: Howard Cook's World War II Drawings

“A solid green mess,” is how artist Taos artist Howard Cook (1901-1980) described the jungles of the South Pacific in a July 4, 1943 letter to his wife, fellow artist Barbara Latham. With World War II in full swing, Cook had been invited to participate as a correspondent in the War Art Program, which had been established in February that same year. Assigned to document the daily lives of American soldiers in the South Solomon Islands, Cook created numerous sketches and drawings depicting both the monotony and danger of military life, and completed several prints and paintings after returning to the United States. He also wrote dozens of letters to Latham during his time abroad, providing insight into his experiences during the assignment.

This exhibit explores Cook's tenure with the War Art Program through a selection of his South Pacific drawings and sketches. In addition to the RMAC's holdings, paintings on loan from the New Mexico Military Institute are on view. Visitors will find quotations from Cook's letters to Latham throughout the label text, allowing the artist to convey his experiences in his own words. From the terror of hiding in foxholes during air raids to the novelty of flying in an airplane, viewers will not only see Cook's working process as an artist, but also glimpse his reflections on the challenges of war.

The War Art Program

Cook's involvement in the South Pacific was a result of the War Art Program, which represented a collaboration between military and civilian artistic forces. During the initial development of the program, military artists were intended to be the primary participants, but this changed when General Frederick Osborn appointed artist and WPA muralist George Biddle to assist in the project. Biddle devised a new program that recruited civilian as well as enlisted artists to document the war, and created an invitation list of 32 participants, with 13 as backups. A personal acquaintance of President Franklin Roosevelt, Biddle succeeded in obtaining federal funding for the project.

Officially launched in February 1943, the War Art Program assigned participants to groups and sent them to different geographic regions. Civilian participants were appointed an officer's rank; artists already serving in the military maintained their present position. Cook served as a Colonel, and was sent to Noumea, capital of the island New Caledonia. He was also put in command of his group, which included artists Aaron Bohrod and Charles Shannon.

The South Pacific in World War II

Cook was in New Caledonia from May through August of 1943, at a time when the South Pacific, particularly the island of Guadalcanal, held a powerful place in the public imagination. From August 1942 to February 1943, American and Japanese troops had endured the Guadalcanal Campaign, a grueling six-month endeavor that engaged armed, naval, and aviation forces simultaneously. American forces eventually succeeded in gaining control of the island, and the battle was regarded as an important Allied victory. The memoir *Guadalcanal Diary* by war correspondent Richard Tregaskis, first published in 1943 and made into a film that same year, helped to further popularize the campaign within the public sphere.

Cook himself would also see action during his time in the South Pacific, including the Invasion of Rendova, when American troops landed on Rendova Island in order to take control of the Munda airport on nearby New Georgia Island, a critical air base.

Cook and *Collier's* Magazine

Cook had originally intended to stay in the South Pacific for about six months, but his plans changed when Congress voted to cease funding the War Art Program on July 1, 1943, effective in September. The decision was especially difficult for artists already enlisted in the armed forces, as they were expected to resume their normal military duties.

After Congress announced its decision, *Life* magazine offered to hire on all civilian artists enrolled in the War Art Program. Cook turned down the offer, joining the art staff of *Collier's* magazine instead. He stayed in New Caledonia until the end of August, then returned to the United States to create finished paintings and prints based on his sketches. He was optimistic about his assignment, writing in an August letter that he had already “gotten excellent start on my job for *Collier's*, planning a double spread watercolor of landing action, something that will be authentic and timely.” You can see this painting in the November 13, 1943 issue of *Collier's* on display.