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Veterans embrace the power of art



Keith Ockimey points out features of "The Moorish Chief" as fellow veterans (from left) Terry Roberts, Ronald Brooks, and Wilbur Williams gather around. They are part of the V.E.T. Art (Veterans Empowered Through Art) program. MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer

By [Edward Colimore](#), Inquirer Staff Writer

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During their first tour of the Philadelphia Museum of Art last summer, the military veterans entered a modern-art gallery displaying a series of paintings that troubled them.

Something about the scribbly nature of Cy Twombly's *Fifty Days at Iliam*, based on Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad*, stirred visceral emotions, dark memories of their service. One veteran teared up.

In another gallery, similar feelings were elicited by *The Gross Clinic*, the painting by Thomas Eakins showing a doctor performing surgery on a leg in 1875. It reminded them too much of wounds on the battlefield.

But the group, including some scarred by combat several decades ago, moved on to other galleries with paintings and sculptures that lifted their spirits and seemed to almost have healing qualities.

On Wednesday, after more than a half-dozen museum visits, six former Army and Marine service members from the Veterans Empowerment Center at the Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center in West Philadelphia took a tour they created - based on their own likes - and learned to sketch a copy of a still life, using 3-D techniques.

The visits, part of a new museum program called V.E.T. Art (Veterans Empowered Through Art), have provided therapy to service members with mental and behavioral issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder.

The outreach is part of the museum's accessible-programs workshops, which offer people with disabilities the experience of making art amid the museum's rich collection.

"I feel like I'm in another world here," said Keith Ockimey, 52, a Cherry Hill resident who served in Bosnia during Operation Joint Forge in 2002. "You forget your problems and your cares."



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"It's awesome and therapeutic," he said.

Standing with Ockimey and other comrades before the tour, Vietnam veteran Vincent Phillips said the Art Museum's peaceful atmosphere leaves him feeling "relaxed."

"You can just use your imagination," said Phillips, 68, a Cherry Hill resident who fought with the Army's Ninth Infantry during the 1968 Tet Offensive.

As the last veterans arrived for the tour, the guide, Deena Gerson, got their attention. "We are going to revisit your choices - the objects that spoke to you," she said.

The group entered a large elevator that took them to the cavernous lobby, dominated by the copper statue of Diana by Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

"That's our favorite," said Terry Roberts, 66, a Burlington Township man who served in Vietnam. "I think it's the first thing I saw when we came here."

Gerson led the veterans through the front door of the museum, with the Benjamin Franklin Parkway stretched out before them. "Who remembers how many steps" to the top? she said. "Come on! Seventy-two."

Back inside, the veterans stopped at Saint-Gaudens' marble *Angel of Purity*, which commemorates the spirit of Maria Gouverneur Mitchell, who died of diphtheria in Philadelphia in 1898 at the age of 22.

The tour then stopped to see a small version of Alexander Milne Calder's sculpture of William Penn that tops City Hall and the stunning Charles Willson Peale painting of Yarrow Mamout, also known as Muhammad Yaró, a former slave who became a Georgetown property owner in Washington.

"It's a pleasant smile," said Army Vietnam veteran Ronald Brooks, 67, of Philadelphia's Overbrook section. Next to the painting hung Peale's self-portrait.

"I love the sculptures, the Indian art, African art, anything that's striking," said Army veteran Duval Diaz, 55, a Pennsauken resident who served 14 years, including one tour in Afghanistan. "I make new friends, and the art relaxes my mind."

The veterans were especially fascinated by little clues and mysteries hidden in paintings. They studied a 1773 John Singleton Copley painting, *Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mifflin*, where Mifflin is holding a book, with his finger holding a place between pages, while his wife is making her own silk fringe for lace.

"This is just a few years before the Declaration of Independence, and we're pissed about taxation without representation," Gerson said. "We wanted stuff made in America."

What was Thomas Mifflin reading, Gerson wondered? Was his wife making the lace so she wouldn't have to buy any from England?

Walking past *The Gross Clinic*, Brooks turned away. "We didn't like that much," he said. "It gave us bad memories."

The museum visits, though, "have given me more confidence to be around other people besides vets," Brooks said. "This is working; it's helping me socialize more."

"Most of the guys here are combat veterans," he said. "This takes your mind off a lot of crazy things."

One of the group's favorite paintings was one from 1878 by Eduard Charlemont called *The Moorish Chief*, also known as "the Harem Guard."

"The look on his face is like, 'Don't mess with me,'" said Ockimey.

"It puts fear in your heart, the way he looks," added Brooks.

The tour offered a great learning experience for Korean War Army veteran Wilbur Williams, 79, a Germantown resident who said he enjoyed hearing the "stories behind every piece of art. I'm not a very cultured person, and I'm just trying to take in everything I can."

After visiting the arms and armor gallery - with full suits of medieval armor - the veterans headed to their last stop, where they learned to sketch with the help of instructor Janice Merendino.

Their subject was a 1630 Frans Snyders painting of a wreath of fruit. "We want to get these pieces of fruit to pop off the paper," said Merendino.

Soon, Ockimey and others were sketching like pros. "I listen intently and will go from there," he said. "I'll do more of this."

Wednesday's pilot program "was for veterans by veterans," said Marissa Clark, the museum's accessible-programs coordinator. "I will have my veterans who created the program with me take other groups on tours. This is empowering them to learn new skills."

A women's veterans group also will be started, said Felicia Zimmer, a nurse at the Veterans Empowerment Center. "The program has been very helpful to the veterans," she said.

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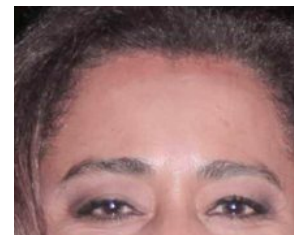
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