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Dayton Art in Cameroon

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The United States State Department selected "Byzantine," a 31-foot wall mural, for inclusion in the ART in Embassies program, which exhibits original works of art by U.S. citizens in the public rooms of approximately 180 American diplomatic residences worldwide.

The painting is the product of the 2009 Blue Sky program at the University of Dayton, an eight-week residency program that hosted five professional artists from around the world committed to work with teams of local teens to create contemporary works of art. Seven teen participants collaborated with Baltimore artist Katherine Mann to create "Byzantine."

"Byzantine' definitely looks like the rest of my body of work," said Mann, who has submitted other paintings to the State Department's ART in Embassies registry. "But it also has all of these other voices integrated into the piece, and that's what makes it so special, and I believe that's why it was selected."

The painting had been displayed at the Dayton International Airport since May.

The U.S. State Department established the ART In Embassies Program in 1964 and features art loaned from galleries, museums, individual artists and corporate and private collections. The department says the art plays an important role in the nation's public diplomacy, providing international audiences with a sense of the quality, scope and diversity of American art and culture.

Mann said the selection of her work is particularly special since her father was a U.S. diplomat and she grew up seeing great works of art in ambassadors' homes, placed there by the ART in Embassies program.

"I can remember seeing Andy Warhols in the ambassador's residence in Tel Aviv, so this is sort of like a dream come true," she said.

The Blue Sky Project — founded in 2004 in a Chicago suburb — made Dayton its permanent home in 2009 in partnership with the University of Dayton.

"Blue Sky fits perfectly with the University of Dayton's Marianist values of living and learning in community and reaching out to engage others," said Paul Benson, dean of the University's College of Arts and Sciences. The University has pledged financial support for the program, houses artists in the student neighborhood and offers the use of ArtStreet studios and other arts buildings.

Blue Sky's reputation as an artist-in-residence program is growing quickly. Artists say it's appealing for its focus on collaboration with teens — many of whom have little artistic training — the local community and with the other professional artists, Blue Sky founder Peter Benkendorf said. Artworks have been exhibited at Priska Juschka Fine Art in New York City, featured in The New Yorker and exhibited and sold at ArtChicago. At least 12 Blue Sky youth alumni are now pursuing art degrees in college.

"What excites me about Blue Sky is how quickly our model has resonated with artists from around the world, as international artists now comprise about 15 percent of our applicants," Benkendorf said. "Artists from major markets like New York, Chicago, Tokyo and Montreal, are finding they can do things in Dayton they cannot do in their hometowns. And to be able to partner with an institution like the University of Dayton, which shares the same values of community and collaboration, has opened up a whole new sea of possibilities for the program and the participants."

Mann describes the painting as the combination of observations of the natural environment in Dayton with individual abstract compositions.

"Each panel of "Byzantine" began with the chance operation of poured ink and pigment on paper, and were subsequently populated by the youth participants with details and characters to flesh out what became, eventually, a fantastical, even grotesque, abstract environment," she said.
Teen participants included Dayton residents Tim Brown, Brandi Dale, Ray Graetz, Tony Hoogsteden, Sydney Joslin-Knapp and Whitney Taylor, and Beavercreek resident Roseline Rodriguez. Smith College graduate Emily Burkman also collaborated on the project as a Blue Sky artist intern.

*For more information, contact Cameron Fullam, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or fullam@udayton.edu.*