

# A PATRIOTIC WESTERN ARTIST'S JOURNEY

by John Faubion

Artist Lawrence Tenney Stevens (1896-1972) was proud to be an American and quick to come to his country's defense. He was a well established artist who had already made impressive contributions to American art when, on December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

At the time, Stevens was wintering in Palm Springs, California. In the leased home and gardens of pioneer Cornelia White (the site is now a museum), he offered art lessons while making plans and designs for a gateway to the city. Consistent with his monumental sculptures for the 1936 Dallas Centennial Exposition, and the 1939 New York World's Fair, his plans were ambitious. The gateway was to be a fifty-foot-tall "sun goddess" with outstretched arms that cars would pass under when entering and exiting the city. As he had during the First World War, Stevens felt compelled to set artistic pursuits aside to volunteer for the war effort (his vision for the gateway was never fulfilled).

At the Douglas Aircraft company in Santa Monica, California, which Stevens described as battle-ready with "wire fences, guards, machine guns, anti-aircraft emplacements, and high protective walls of sandbags ...," he accepted an offer to join a secret mission dubbed Project 19. The mission was to establish a major facility in Gura, Africa, to repair damaged Allied aircraft and get them flying again as quickly as possible. Stevens, and approximately 1400 others, would be traveling by sea to Africa toward the end of May. He had until then to get his affairs in order, which included moving his temporary studio and personal belongings from Palm Springs back to his 2,000 acre ranch in Cody, Wyoming.

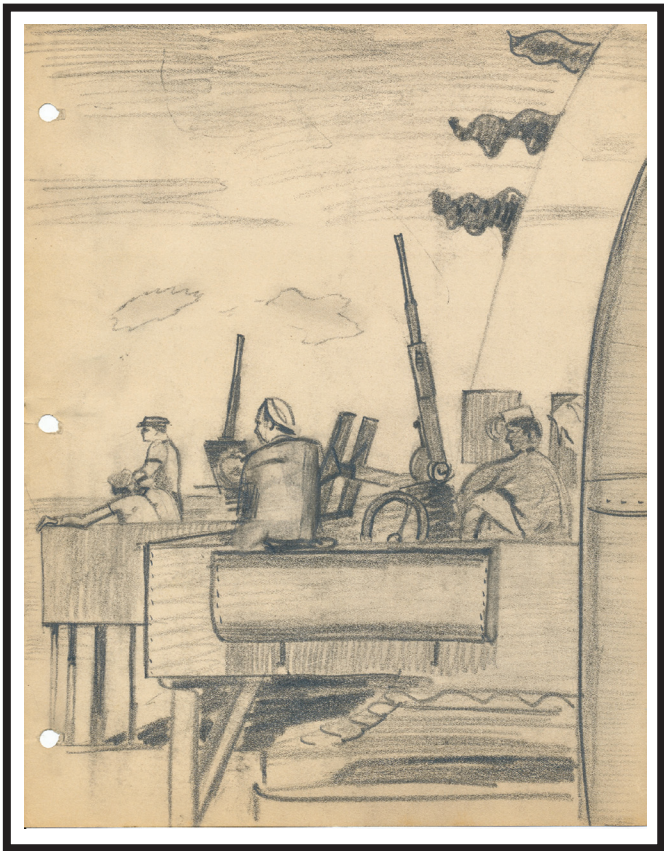
Stevens had seen enough of the world to feel strongly about Cody. International travels after winning the 1922 Prix de Rome (America's most prestigious arts competition at the time) convinced him that: "America is about as different from any other country as chalk is from cheese - and that in itself demands an art significant of it." His visits to Cody, beginning in the spring of 1929, led him to believe that it was there that the great art of America would be born. He envisioned using his ranch as a retreat to expose artists to the beauty and bounty of the West, writing: "This simple dynamic living, the very mother's breast of our country, would be a fitting proving ground for the establishment of the true American art in a big way."

Time has given historians a broader perspective of Cody's impact on Stevens and vice versa. In 1932, his was the first sculpture show held at the Buffalo Bill Museum. He was the first to apply Moderne styling, inspired by his trip to Egypt shortly after the discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb, to Cody-inspired sculptures, drawings, and prints, in a formal celebration of the American West. This body of work is now regarded as having influenced the emergence and evolution of a style of the Western arts known as Cody High Style or Cowboy High Style.

Prior to leaving for Africa, Stevens applied his bold Moderne style to a patriotic linocut print that appeared in The Desert Sun of Palm Springs, California, on February 13, 1942. In his words: "This block cut showing our War Time Uncle Sam 'Setting the Rising Sun,' is heartily dedicated to Edison McDaniels [a high school student] who posed for Uncle Sam, and the six finalists in the Lions Speech Contest who all thrilled me with their speeches today on our 'America.' "

On May 28, 1942, under cover of darkness, Army troops and F.B.I. agents stood guard on the coast of Charleston, South Carolina, as Stevens and hundreds of men boarded the USS Chateau Thierry bound for Africa. Stevens kept a handwritten journal of the voyage which swelled to 157 pages interlaced with pencil sketches. During the 56 day voyage, the Thierry managed to avoid German submarines, but a major supply ship in their convoy was sunk setting the mission back several months.

With many of their critical tools and materials lost at sea, the mission relied on Stevens's experience as a sculptor to cast specialty tools from clay and plaster forms. This eventually resulted in a fully functional metal sculpting shop capable of shaping many critical aircraft parts. By mid-1943, the facility was among the best in the Middle East. Virtually every type of military



Lawrence Tenney Stevens,  
Pencil drawing from Project 19 Journal, aboard the  
USS Chateau Thierry, a well armed converted  
hospital ship from WWI, 1942

aircraft was repaired there. Later that year, the focus of the war shifted, and the repair facility began to wind down. Stevens was sent to Khartoum to repair Russian A-20 aircraft, after which he spent the last months of the war as a Red Cross Field Director on the island of Saipan.

After the war, Stevens eventually settled in Tempe, Arizona. He spent the last years of his life there creating a series of rodeo bronzes that are part of the prestigious J.P. Morgan Chase Collection. His very rare linocut prints and other Western pieces have become highly prized by collectors.

One of Arizona's most generous philanthropists, Katherine K. Herberger, for whom the College of Fine Arts at Arizona State University is named, referred to Stevens as "a consummate artist." I would have added "... and a consummate patriot."

John Faubion has researched, written, and lectured about Lawrence Tenney Stevens since 1995. He is the award-winning co-curator of a major 1996 Stevens retrospective exhibition at the Tempe Historical Museum in Arizona. His discoveries in the Stevens archives contributed to the preservation efforts of the 1936 Dallas Centennial Fair site, and led to the recreation of three of Stevens's monumental sculptures there. He is director of the Lawrence Tenney Stevens Trust.

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## LAWRENCE TENNEY STEVENS (1896-1972)



Lawrence Tenney Stevens, "Setting the Rising Sun" Linocut, 1942  
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In the style of a series of rare Western and wildlife linocut prints pulled from his own press by American sculptor Lawrence Tenney Stevens beginning in the spring of 1935. These are among discoveries in the Stevens archives that have compelled scholars to conclude that Stevens was "an undeniable progenitor of Cowboy High Style."



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