

SATURDAY, NOV. 1, 2014

Newsday

# act2



## BRUSHES WITH DIPLOMACY

WITH HER ART IN U.S. EMBASSIES,  
BARBARA ERNST PREY IS A VISUAL AMBASSADOR

B4



RESTAURANT WEEK New dining spots offering prix fixe specials [exploreLI.com/restaurants](http://exploreLI.com/restaurants)

# PAINTER

with a

# WORLDWIDE PERSPECTIVE

Barbara Ernst Prey's artworks have a global reach, from embassies to the White House

BY JAN TYLER  
Special to Newsday

**T**he life of Barbara Ernst Prey as an American contemporary painter has been a journey that began when she was 9, learning at the side of her artist mother, and has taken her to the White House and far beyond.

Hong Kong is the latest destination for one of her landscapes. In July, the State Department's cultural program, Art in Embassies (art.state.gov), announced its selection of Prey's watercolor, "Parade Route," for exhibition at the Consulate General of the

United States, Hong Kong and Macau — the fifth time her work has been selected by the program. U.S. embassies in Prague, Oslo, Madrid and Paris also have displayed her paintings. Prey's contribution this year is one of 11 by American and Chinese artists chosen for the three-year exhibit.

"AIE is a nonpolitical element of diplomacy," says Robert Soppelsa, the program's senior curator. "We rely on artists for their creativity in presenting America to the world the way they see it as individuals, not to glorify it. In their roles as visual ambassadors, their personal visions add a more intimate layer to America's relations with other countries."

The program, which was started more than 40 years ago, has expanded to include artists worldwide who work in all types of mediums, from acrylic to paper to wood. (See box.)

#### WORLD OF SUBJECTS

Known for her watercolor landscapes, Prey, 57, has traveled the world capturing scenes of natural beauty: a waterfall in Scotland, a beach in Bali. After 40 years of globe-trotting, the Oyster Bay resident is still eager to be on the road again and again.

Her post-college career was launched in Europe and Asia. After receiving her master's degree in fine arts from Harvard University in 1986, she was awarded an 18-month Fulbright scholarship and a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. In 2002, her career went into high gear when an ambassador of the U.S. diplomatic service came calling after seeing her work in a Luce Foundation exhibition. "He suggested I register for the AIE program, and I went for it," she says.

Other Prey artworks have been shown in private galleries throughout Asia and Europe, and in this country at the

### Art's diplomatic mission

**T**he Art in Embassies program was the brainchild of the Museum of Modern Art, now MoMA, in 1953. About 10 years later, the museum formed a partnership with the U.S. Department of State to further diplomacy through the visual arts. About 20,000 participating artists and organizations in 189 countries are associated with

the program. Artworks exhibited in embassies and consulates are on loan from the artists.

■ For more information about how to register with the program to be considered for inclusion, visit [nwsdy.li/AIE](http://nwsdy.li/AIE)

■ For information about National Endowment for the Arts grants for artists, go to [arts.gov](http://arts.gov)

— JAN TYLER

#### ON THE COVER

Watercolor artist Barbara Ernst Prey inset in a photo of her palette and brushes.



Prey, who has served as New York's representative to the National Council on the Arts, sketches in Oyster Bay, where she lives. ■ Video, more photos at [newsday.com/act2](http://newsday.com/act2)

Brooklyn Museum and the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Her reputation as a painter often put Prey within the sphere of influential leaders in politics, corporate business and entertainment — many of whom have commissioned her artwork, she says. Former New York Gov. Hugh Carey, for instance, purchased one of her early watercolors for his Shelter Island retreat.

#### WATER AND COLORS

Prey's painting for the consulate in Hong Kong depicts a small fleet of American schooners, proudly sailing under the Stars and Stripes. It is a favorite of Prey, who grew up in Manhasset and feels a strong

connection to Long Island. She now lives at the parsonage of Oyster Bay's First Presbyterian Church, where her husband, the Rev. Jeffrey Prey, 56, is the minister, and where she paints in a spacious, third-floor studio. The Preys have two grown children.

"As a teenager, I sailed an 18-foot Thistle [dinghy] on Long Island Sound, and I've always been interested in boats, water and light," Prey says. "The Luce grant allowed me to live and work in Asia, where I often painted scenes of marine activity in Hong Kong's harbor, so I am especially thrilled to have this painting ["Parade Route"] in the embassy collection."

Michael W. Schantz, execu-



Prey's watercolors include, clockwise from left, "Columbia Tribute," "Parade Route" and "Shades of Blue." A U.S. State Department cultural program chose "Parade Route" for exhibition at the Consulate General of the United States, Hong Kong and Macau.



tive director of the Heckscher Museum of Art in Huntington, where Prey was the 2011 artistic honoree, says, "Her work is superb. Her flawless technique ranks her among the most important watercolorists who ever painted in this most difficult and unforgiving medium."

In 2004, Prey received a Woman of Distinction award from the State Senate. Its website states the award is "given to outstanding women living and working in New York State whose contributions have enriched the quality of life in their communities and beyond." For the past six years, she has served as New York's representative to the National Council on the Arts, an advisory arm of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Prey and other council members research applications from artists and pass

their findings to the NEA, which awards grants. "The NEA is open to artists, musicians, photographers and performing artists in dance and theater," says Prey. "Like the Art in Embassies program . . . [it] is well worth investigating by serious artists, not only for the NEA's financial support, but for its enormous prestige."

#### WHITE HOUSE HONOR

The 14 council members meet several times a year in Washington, Prey says, often at the White House — a place that became familiar to her after she was commissioned to paint an image for the official White House Christmas card in 2003. "I was overwhelmed by the honor," Prey says. "I was chosen [to do the Christmas card] because Laura Bush owned one of my paintings and

was familiar with my work."

The first lady gave her a personal tour of the White House and grounds to scout out a setting for the card's image. "We chose the Diplomatic Reception Room, where dignitaries are welcomed and where President Franklin Roosevelt held his famous fireside chats," Prey says. "Afterward, I was invited to a small, unofficial dinner with the president and Laura Bush." Prey presided over the quality control as 1.5 million cards were printed by Hallmark in Kansas City, Missouri.

Another memorable commission came in 2003, when NASA asked her to do four works for its permanent collection. In the next few years, she painted "x-43," "The International Space Station," "The Shuttle Discovery: Return to Flight" and the "Columbia

Tribute." The tribute was "a commemorative painting for which I spent months visiting the site and researching details," she says.

Prey often serves as a visiting artist in schools here and abroad. "I'm a keen advocate for art education as a stimulant for creativity," she says, "and also for its therapeutic benefit."

Her "realism" painting style offers glimpses of pristine nature around the world, with an emphasis on America. Her landscapes capture a mountain creek in Sun Valley, Idaho, or a humble fisherman's cottage in Maine — but more often, her subject is Long Island seascapes, from Jones Beach to Montauk.

"My mother, Peggy Ernst, was a professional artist in New York City, and her encouragement was priceless,"

Prey says. "As a small child, I set up my easel next to hers on beaches and rocks, and we painted together as I learned from her."

She says that growing up with an artist mother and living near Manhattan museums helped her absorb great art at an impressionable age. "That's the best advice I can pass along to talented students: Really look at those masterworks, examine the brushwork, the colors, the compositions," Prey says. "Think about what the artist was trying to tell you. . . . I still do this when I visit museums around the world."

In the works is a book of American landscapes and a new lecture on creativity in art. "The ideas keep coming," she says. "There's so much more I want to do, and there's so little time."