The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Ralph Ernest White, Jr., professor emeritus, art and art history, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
RALPH ERNEST WHITE, Jr.

Ralph Ernest White, Jr., a professor in the Department of Art and Art History at The University of Texas from 1946 until his retirement in 1982, died Friday, September 10, 2004, following complications from surgery. For over three decades Ralph White’s passion for art and teaching served as an inspiration to the students of The University of Texas. He embodied to his students and colleagues the archetype of the artist/teacher in the profession. Ralph’s keen analytical mind challenged and encouraged students to make better work than they thought themselves capable of attaining. He was an avid reader and thinker whose gracious and humble home was always a warm and friendly place to visit for faculty and students alike. Guided by his love for art and teaching, he founded the graphic design and communication arts area of the department and taught some of its early classes. He once wrote about his students: “You hope for each student that each time you see them, they’ll have grown, solved a problem. You must come to students with a commitment of your own…a stimulation must be there. You must believe in it.”

His passion was painting and drawing and his work would soon become internationally known in those disciplines. Ralph also served as (acting) chairman of the department from July 1970 to August 1974, a period of time that saw both an expansion in the size of the department and increased prominence in its national reputation.

Ralph was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on January 3, 1921. He studied at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and the University of Minnesota, earning his certificate in the spring of 1942. After graduation, Ralph applied for and was accepted for a fall induction to cadet training in the Army Air Corps. Before going into flight school, he spent the summer of 1942 working as a fireguard at Glacier National Park in Montana. Reflecting upon that summer several years later, Ralph credited some of the imagery experienced that summer as a basis for works he painted later in life.

In the Army Air Corps, Ralph piloted the four-engine B-24 bombers and also served as a flight instructor for other young pilots. His other duties included being a test pilot for an even larger prototype bomber aircraft, eventually developing into the B-32.

One of the many benefits he derived from his time in Texas and the Army Air Corps was the development of a long friendship with Ward Lockwood. Lockwood, also an officer in the Army Air Corps and stationed at the same base as Ralph, was on leave from The University of Texas. Before the war, while Ward was at UT, he had been chairman of the art department. Ward had seen some of Ralph’s drawings and sketches and was so impressed by what he saw that he often talked to Ralph about the art program at UT. He wanted Ralph to consider coming to UT to teach following his discharge from the Army Air Corps. As it turned out, this friendship was very influential in convincing Ralph to come teach in Texas, and subsequently, he did just that.

At the end of the war, Ralph applied for and was accepted for employment as a commercial pilot. He qualified for a priority release from military service late in 1945. As a result of a delay in the commercial airlines expansion program, Ralph decided to move to New York and exercise another option open to him. He had been awarded a Van Derlip Award from the Minneapolis School of Art, now the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. This award, a post-graduate fellowship award, was given annually to one or two students for continuation of their studies. Ralph had been awarded his in 1942 just as he was going into the service. Ralph
decided to use his Van Derlip award and attend Pratt Institute in New York City, where he received a commission for ten large historical paintings of the city. After completing his work at Pratt Institute, he headed back to Texas where he had spent most of his military flying days and joined the faculty at UT. He was hired to teach and develop a program in graphic design and the communication arts, which led to the inception of the Visual Communications program that existed in the Department of Art and Art History until the late 1980s at which time it evolved into our present day design program.

Ralph met his wife Ruby in Grapevine, Texas. They were married in Dallas on January 12, 1951. They had three children, Ralph Jr., Brett, and Kathy. All three have grown up to follow their own individual creative paths.

In the early 1950s, Ralph and Ruby built a home with a small studio on a wooded hillside overlooking the city of Austin. By the mid 1960s, with an increase in administrative assignments and an intensification of direction and productivity in painting, Ralph became aware of his need for a larger studio. He began accumulating materials and took pride in “scrounging” such items as railroad ties that would be used to construct a new home, studio and gallery space. Their newly acquired property was located at Commanders Point overlooking Lake Travis, west of Austin. In time, with the help of family and friends, Ralph and Ruby built their dream house at Commanders Point. It was a labor of love taking several years to complete, and when finished, was a work of art and a place of warmth and hospitality. The work of six decades fills the sixty-foot gallery connecting the house and studio.

Things were happening at the department as well. The University of Texas was going to build a new building to house the art department and the Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery to open in 1961. Ralph was selected to help in the design of the new building.

In 1970, Ralph received a grant to visit Basel, Switzerland, and the Swiss Alps to nurture his design skills. He spent about six months in Europe, traveling and sketching, before returning to Austin to begin a new phase in his career as acting departmental chairman. He served in this capacity until 1974, when the first permanent chairman was hired.

The period of 1970-74 was pivotal in the department’s history. It was during the 1973-74 budget cycle of the Texas Legislature that a former art student of Ralph’s called him on the telephone to ask if there was anything in particular that the art department needed. The former student, Neal Caldwell, was instrumental in writing the budget bill for the Legislature. Without missing a beat, Ralph told him that the department needed funding for sabbatical leaves to be used for research and studio practice. No sooner said than done, a stipend of $25,000 for faculty enrichment was written into the budget as a line item and passed both houses and was subsequently signed by the governor. History was made.

The department turned a corner during Ralph’s watch. There was a dynamic young faculty with expertise in a multitude of media, high morale, and a large student population. This faculty now had an opportunity to grow as artists and teachers with the encouragement of both the University and the Texas legislature. This was just the incentive that Ralph needed. He submitted a competitive grant proposal on behalf of the department of art to the Ford Foundation. The proposal was to establish an ongoing faculty enrichment program. It was approved and funded over the next decade. In 1974, Ralph stepped down as chairman and returned to his true love of painting and drawing and the teaching of those courses full time, leaving a legacy of growth, quality instruction, and fairness in all things.

Ralph’s career and reputation continued to grow, earning him many honors and awards over the next three decades. He was awarded a University Research Institute grant in 1970 and a Ford Foundation grant in 1978. He has had solo exhibitions in Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey, Mexico, as well as Austin, Dallas, Houston, and Galveston. He also had a solo exhibition in Kitzbuehl, Austria. His work is in numerous private collections and twenty-five public collections throughout the U.S. and Europe.

Perhaps one of the most prestigious accomplishments of his illustrious career occurred on April 29, 2003:

RESOLVED, That the 78th Legislature of the State of Texas hereby honor Ralph White on the occasion of his selection as Texas state Artist for 2003 in the two dimensional category.
This proclamation was passed in the House and the Senate and presented before both Houses by the Governor of the state of Texas. This honor was followed by the Austin Critics Table selecting Ralph as one of twelve individuals to be inducted into the Austin Arts Hall of Fame in March 2003.

Ralph retired from teaching in 1982 as a professor emeritus. His retirement from teaching only intensified his energies for painting. In recent years, he embarked on a series of smaller paintings that he called “Visual Essays.” In an exhibition catalogue of his work in May 2000, Ralph had this to say about his paintings:

> An essay is a thing of the imagination. If there is information in an essay, it is by-the-by, and if there is an opinion in it, you need not trust it for the long run. A genuine essay has no educational, polemical, or sociopolitical use. It is the movement of a free mind at play”…(From the Best American Essays, 1998).

Over the past decades experimental smaller paintings have provided imagery for larger works. The smaller works through the past two years have increased in spontaneity and number. They involve basic elements of color, shape, line, movement, texture, and space.

I define them as visual essays, open to interpretation and hopefully providing a pleasure for the eye, an experience for the mind, and a response for the heart, evoking both mystery and discovery.

Ralph White loved life and embraced it with great enthusiasm. His broad knowledge of science and art yielded an interest in many subjects. He was an avid sailor and over a six year period, one month at a time, sailed his thirty-foot Pearson through the Gulf of Mexico and up the Atlantic coast to the Chesapeake Bay. He enjoyed classical music, golf, and bridge. He was a skilled carpenter and a formidable tennis competitor.

Ralph White died from complications following surgery on Friday, September 10, 2004. He leaves behind a legacy of compassion, fairness and wisdom, and memories of a charismatic man who influenced the lives of all who came in contact with him. Although the man himself is a memory, his spirit and his soul continue to live forever in the paintings he leaves with us.

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Lee Chesney (Chair), Vincent Mariani, and Gibbs Milliken.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Fine Arts, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on November 14, 2005. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, WMB 2.102, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.