

Pete Felten ARTS LEGACY AWARD nomination text

Why the nominee deserves this award -

Pete Felten epitomizes everything the Kansas Arts Legacy Award stands for. He is an individual with a lifetime of long-standing, significant impact on the arts in Kansas, enriching the cultural landscape through his creative contributions and advocacy over many years. He is firmly entrenched in the history of our state, and this esteemed award would be a well-deserved and most-fitting recognition of a life enthusiastically well lived in creative & cultural pursuit.

Among the many cultural treasures of Western Kansas, few if any have received more regional notoriety than perhaps Pete Felten. Regional and national interest in his work & its place in Kansas history has spawned articles in the Los Angeles Times, The Denver Post, Wichita Eagle and many other Kansas newspapers, cultural & tourism publications, and online blogs. Felten was featured in two programs on Public Television and a new Felten documentary “Shinbone Alley” premiered online three weeks ago (website link included here)

After having spent four years in military service, Felten attended Fort Hays State University but left in 1957 to pursue sculpting full-time. Aside from time in the military, being an artist has been his sole profession. Though primarily self-taught, he has read widely in his field and achieved broad acclaim for his many public sculptures created for locations across the state. His creative passions sent him on what has been a lauded & fulfilling 68-year journey. In fact, as of three months ago – at the age of 92 (& before a recent health setback) – Pete was still carving in his studio nearly every day. His primary medium is Kansas limestone, a natural resource and creative medium whose impact and importance to the state is celebrated by no one else in the way it is by him.

A large number of works over the past 6 decades have been commissions – created for schools, churches, city squares, historical sites, community centers, and private collectors. His largest commission was that of the four eight-foot-tall portraits of Amelia Earhart, William Allen White, Arthur Capper & Dwight Eisenhower that encircle the Kansas Capitol rotunda.

Pete represents what it means to be a true artist. He is both one of the state’s most interested – AND interesting – citizens. His work demonstrates a significance & magnitude of creative achievement; a remarkable length of time and intensity to his creative pursuits; a “creative leadership” that has stimulated art growth, support & availability; as well as his obvious contributions to excellence in the arts. Pete Felten has stayed true to his mission. Indeed, for nearly 70 years, Pete has nicked out a most impressive life from limestone, finding his existence through sheets of Kansas sediment.

Significant & relevant achievements & awards -

Highlights of Pete Felten's life & career include:

1979 – Felten was awarded the commission to create the Kansas State Capitol sculptures of famous Kansans Amelia Earhart, William Allen White, Arthur Capper, and Dwight D. Eisenhower with the project completed with the installation in 1981. Like John Steuart Curry (with whom Pete shares Capitol space), Felten didn't sign his capitol artwork either, but for entirely different reasons, explaining, "This is Kansas' work, not mine." Fortunately, with help from Representative Barb Wasinger & Senator Elaine Bowers, a proposal was submitted to the Capitol Preservation Committee to add a bronze plaque next to each sculpture that gives Felten credit for his work. Over 40 years after the installation of the sculptures, the bronze plaques were added on June 28, 2024

1970's, 1980's & 1990's – Felten sculpture selected for the Kansas-wide "Smoky Hill Art Competition" and receiving a major cash award from juror Douglas Freed in 1993

Mid 1980's – Felten honored by the Courtney-Spaulding Chapter of the DAR for his depiction and celebration of Kansas heritage and culture through the arts

2017 – Retrospective exhibition "Carved in Stone: The Legacy of Pete Felten" at the Hays Arts Center

April 2023 – Resolution No. 6026 honoring Pete Felten presented by the Kansas House of Representatives: "Be it resolved by the House of Representatives of the State of Kansas: That we honor the sculptor Pete Felten on his 90th birthday; and Be it further resolved: That we celebrate the hundreds of limestone creations sculpted by Felten, including his four famous Kansans in the Kansas State Capitol."

His work is included in the public art collections of: Kansas State Capitol; Emprise Bank Collection; Hadley Foundation Art Collection at Hays Medical Center; Sandzén Memorial Art Gallery; Lincoln Art Center, and Fort Hays State University – with sculptures having been commissioned and installed in Hays, Oberlin, Atwood, Victoria, Stockton, Norton, Ness City, WaKeeney, Protection among other Kansas communities and organizations

Pete Felten has been the subject of three documentaries – two produced by Smoky Hills Public Television through the "Kansas Arts Today" series (1993 & 2001) and one recently produced by Jordon Horsch called "Shinbone Alley – A Pete Felten Documentary" premiering in October 2025.