

Coming Soon to a Hallowed Hall of Spaceflight: An X-Wing Fighter

Starting late next year, an X-wing from “Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker” will go on display at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington.

By Michael Levenson

May 5, 2021

The National Air and Space Museum holds some of the most hallowed objects of the aerial age.

Visitors can marvel at the 1903 Wright Flyer that skimmed over Kitty Hawk, N.C., the bright red Lockheed 5B Vega that Amelia Earhart piloted alone across the Atlantic Ocean and the bell-shaped Friendship 7 capsule that made John H. Glenn Jr. the first American to orbit the Earth.

Now, the museum said, it will display a spacecraft that has flown only onscreen, in an entirely fictional galaxy where good and evil seem locked in eternal battle.

That’s right: An X-wing Starfighter will grace the museum’s newly renovated building on the National Mall sometime late next year, the museum said on Tuesday, which was celebrated by “Star Wars” fans as a holiday because it was May 4 (May the 4th be with you).

The Hollywood prop, with a wingspan of 37 feet, appeared in “Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker” in 2019 and is on long-term loan from Lucasfilm, the movie’s production company.

While air and space purists may grumble about precious exhibition space being turned over to a pretend craft that played no role in advancing actual space travel, the exhibition is not the first time the museum has allied itself with the franchise’s crowd-pleasing power. In the late 1990s, it presented “Star Wars: The Magic of Myth,” a show based on the original “Star Wars” trilogy; that show went on tour across the country.

“Despite taking place a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, ‘Star Wars’ introduced generations of fans here on Earth to outer space as a setting for adventure and exploration,” Margaret Weitekamp, the museum’s space history chairwoman, said in a statement. “All air and space milestones begin with inspiration, and science fiction so often provides that spark.” She added that “the X-wing displayed amid our other spacecraft celebrates the journey from imagination to achievement.”

Designed as the nimble fighter that Luke Skywalker used to destroy the Death Star in the original 1977 “Star Wars” movie, the X-wing was named for the distinctive shape of its “strike foils when in attack position,” the museum said.

Artists at Industrial Light & Magic, the special-effects studio founded by George Lucas, the movies' creator, depicted X-wings and other "Star Wars" spacecraft with miniatures as well as full-size models and cockpits, enhanced with visual effects, the museum said.

This particular X-wing will undergo "conservation" — also known as cleanup and prep work — in the Restoration Hangar at the museum's Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center in Chantilly, Va., where it will be visible to the public before it goes on display at the museum next year.

While this will be the first "Star Wars" prop on long-term display at the museum since the "Magic of Myth" exhibit in 1997, the museum has also displayed a studio model of the starship Enterprise from the original 1960s "Star Trek" series as well as a Buzz Lightyear toy, from the animated "Toy Story" films, that was flown to the International Space Station in 2008.

A photo released by the museum showed the orange X-wing in a hangar next to a real twin-engine bomber, nicknamed Flak-Bait, that survived more than 200 missions over Europe, more than any other existing American aircraft during World War II.

"Look what's arrived in the shop for a tune up," the museum said on Twitter. "If you see Poe Dameron around, let him know work on his X-wing is coming along nicely, and it'll be ready for display soon."