

Subcommittee on Capitol Art
Preliminary Report to the Minnesota State Capitol Preservation Commission
Appendix
Dissenting Recommendation
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Narrative Summary

We need to move offensive art from the Minnesota state capitol to a venue that will let us contextualize, learn from, and appreciate them. The reason this decision has been so difficult is because it is really a contest between two positive public “goods”—healthy inclusive politics on the one hand and unfettered timeless freedom for artistic representation in the capitol on the other. Because we rightly value freedom so much and provide a universally appreciated freedom of speech the idea of even moving art sometimes rubs people the wrong way. Although there are exceptions, most of the pushback to the idea of moving some of the art to Minnesota Historical Society or another location really is an effort to protect a fundamental American value. The problem is that this bumps into another important value— inclusive and respectful political space—and that value is especially important in our current climate of racial tension and division.

People do not just come to the capitol to learn about art from the 1800s and to understand the context in which those works were created. They go there to participate in their government. Minnesota’s tribal leaders go there for the signing of bills, to meet with legislators, and listen to speeches, often with a painting that romanticizes a painful chapter of their history or is erroneous and insulting, such as Father Hennepin’s “discovery” of St. Anthony Falls. That painting shows Hennepin holding a cross high above the Indians, with a bare-breasted native woman running in the foreground. Hennepin was a Dakota captive at the time so the power dynamics were the opposite of what’s portrayed, and it evokes a paternalistic depiction of the great white father shining light on the heathen savages. Some natives are offended by the inaccuracy. Others are offended by the paternalistic message. Others are offended by the nakedness of the Dakota woman.

Having a backdrop for our politics that is rude or offensive is problem. Only half of our voters turn out for elections. Our government is not representative in terms of class, race, or gender. With the obvious racial tensions we have in our state we cannot afford to reinforce the perception that the government is made by white people for benefit of white people and everyone else is window dressing, a spoil of war, or less. We need to make special efforts to be truly inclusive. There is no opportunity to provide context when a painting hangs behind the governor in a press conference. It is both unwise and just plain rude to expect natives to swallow a gentle dose of racism every time they interact with their government.

We have many grade school children who tour the capitol. When they get a tour they don’t always remember what they read or what the tour guide tells them. But they remember what they see—big beautiful Greco-Roman arches and décor, and pictures of half naked Indians, Indians attacking white people, and Indians dying in battle, some accurately portrayed and some way off the mark.

We have to be careful not to rob our citizens of the power to decide what they find offensive. Gretchen Wilson has a song titled “Redneck Woman,” but that does not mean that we can call every white woman “redneck woman.” Some white women might be offended. Just because one white woman celebrates the label doesn’t mean that all white women do. And nobody should take away the right of white women to determine respectful ways to address them. It’s the same for Indians and the capitol art. We can find an Indian who says it doesn’t cause offense, but we can find many others, including elected tribal leaders representing the majority of their tribal citizens, who say some of the art is offensive. We cannot tell them that they don’t get to make that determination. And it is dangerous to tell them to suffer through it and swallow a spoonful of racism every time they engage our government. Too many spoonful of racism gives Indians indigestion, and it is a mistake to unnecessarily heighten the racial divides and resentments that plague our nation and state. Offensive art at the center of our capitol does cause resentment among already marginalized citizens. We need to build bridges not drive people apart.

Moving art is not censorship, which is defined as the “suppression or prohibition of art, film, or writing.” Nobody is arguing that art should be destroyed, prohibited, or suppressed from the public sphere, just exhibited in a different venue. It would continue to be exhibited and available to the public, just in a different place. In fact, it would probably be viewed more often in a different location. I want my children to see all of the art currently displayed in the capitol, but feel that some careful interpretive material would be necessary. That’s not practical in current display venues, especially for pieces behind the governor at press conferences. A different venue will do them justice without diminishing their importance or causing offense.

Many other places in America wrestle with artistic symbols, and there is a precedent for rearranging public space to show respect for all of our citizens. In the south, statues of confederate generals have been moved out of public parks in New Orleans and the confederate battle flag has been removed from prominent display on state capitol grounds. All people need to rearrange their houses from time to time as our families change and grow and our needs evolve. There is nothing wrong with rearranging the furniture in our shared political home to make everyone in the family feel more welcome and respected.

This what many of our citizens want, as they have said in public hearings on the matter, petitions signed by hundreds of citizens, and letters from constituent groups and elected tribal leaders. This is not political correctness, it’s just right. We need to study, understand, and better contextualize all of the art currently in the capitol wherever it lands. The art needs to be seen for that happen, but seen in a venue that enables context. I want my children to have that opportunity, which is best generated by moving some pieces from the capitol to a museum or historical society. Capitol art is an important symbol about who we are and what we value. Symbols matter. A wedding ring is just a symbol, but it says something profound. Let’s not keep our capitol married to our racist past.

Recommendations

While the work of the Subcommittee progresses toward final recommendations this summer, the substantial efforts and thoughtful input completed so far suggests that final recommendations regarding existing art will meet the following parameters:

1. Father Hennepin's Discovery painting should be removed from the grounds of State Capitol and placed in the Minnesota Historical Society or another public venue where it can be properly interpreted.
2. The Traverse Des Sioux treaty painting should be removed from the Governor's Reception room either to the MHS, another historical venue, or a less auspicious place inside the capitol where it can be exhibited with a high level of interpretive material.
3. The Governor's Reception Room and other functional political spaces that are often used for press conferences, bill signings, and other public ceremonies where interpretation of controversial works is not practical will instead be accented and enlightened by the presence of artwork that is intentionally inclusive and has not received loud public criticism for racism or other divisiveness.
4. All existing, original, historic art works that have not been the subject of substantial controversy to date will remain in the State Capitol (with the possible exception of legislative works)
5. Efforts will be made to explain, interpret and contextualize Capitol art with the primary aim of provide a complete and meaningful educational opportunities to viewers
6. Ojibwe and Dakota tribes and native historians from Minnesota will be consulted in and invited to help draft the interpretive material displayed in the capitol for artworks with significant content and about political figures who had a major impact on tribal life
7. The Subcommittee will honor to the greatest practical extent, the original placement of individual artworks within the Capitol, recognizing that some artworks have previously been relocated and that modifications to floor plan in some areas will necessarily mean that a small number of individual art works will shift location.
8. For allegorical works in particular, ensure that the placement of existing, original and historic art works allows for adequate space to meet the previous objective
9. Ensuring that Cass Gilbert's vision and the historical and architectural integrity of all ceremonial spaces (Zone 1) is maintained to the extent new art is added to the Capitol in those areas, including
 - a. Art be of high quality by leading artists
 - b. Efforts are taken to make new works representative of the diversity in our state today and the anticipated diversity in our state over the next 100 years so that all of our citizens can see themselves reflected in the art in our shared State Capitol

Our Process

The process we have used in addressing capitol art was not effective at generating compromise or consensus, although efforts were made. We started the process very late, leaving meetings rushed and much of the work unfinished. At the wise insistence of Governor Dayton, most of the tribes in Minnesota were finally consulted. They provided a compelling and quite unified voice about what to do with art in the capitol—a perspective most in alignment with my recommendations above. In spite of their clarity of vision for the space, their views were for the most part ignored. At great insistence from me, we pressed a vote on a couple of the most sensitive pieces and got agreement that they should be moved from the Governor’s Reception Room, but not the Capitol itself. Essentially, this was giving the tribes about 5% of what they asked for. Some committee members were completely uncompromising in not just voting, but even use of air time at meetings to develop mutually shared understandings and potential compromise or consensus. Now the heavy lifting will be shifted from this subcommittee to a commission that has no native representation, less female representation, but still retains most of the voices opposed to making changes of any kind in the Capitol. I believe this process has effectively diluted the voice of the people and the voices of the tribes in these important decisions.

I believe that the will of the people and the views of the tribes deserve more weight in the decisions about art in the Capitol than they will be given with our current process. There is a tendency toward tokenism with regard to minority representation so far. Those included were mainly invited to deflect criticism about the lack of native voices in the process rather than to empower those voices with the ability to more effectively influence the process or outcome of decision making.