Artists’ Search For Historical Accuracy

To create a work of art depicting a historical event, like those found in the Minnesota State Capitol, is not an easy undertaking. The artist cannot provide a broad brush stroke to tell the entire story. Like the four corners of the canvas, they are confined to depicting a moment in time.

To achieve this, required study. From models in the studio to gathering information from photographs and historical accounts; conducting interviews with experts and event participants, and visiting the location where the event occurred was part of that process.

The skill of the artist and the quality of the painting is essential in determining the success of a historical scene. In addition to that, the painting’s impact can be measured by its ability to connect the viewer, from the witness of the event to a visitor one hundred years later, that the depiction is as close as possible to what happened.

The following images provide some insight into the artists’ attempt in their search for historical accuracy to make these connections occur.
Battle of Nashville


Shy’s Hill, ca. 1880s.

Pyle included this image in the painting.

(photo: Confederate Veteran, 1909)
Second Minnesota at Mission Ridge


Judson Bishop, about 1865

The officer waving his hat in the painting is Bishop. The depiction is based on this photograph. Each painting in the Governor’s Ante Room and Reception Room has portraits of participants of those events.
Judson Bishop to Douglas Volk, September 12, 1905

Bishop describes for the artist what he was wearing and other battlefield details during the battle of Missionary Ridge.
Studies for the *Second Minnesota at Mission Ridge* painting used by artist Douglas Volk. These were used in his first study of the battle scene that after reviewed by Cass Gilbert, was changed to show the advance up the slope of the ridge rather than the apex of the charge.
Critiques of the painting by Third Minnesota regiment veterans, 1910.

Critique After New Picture
Just Hung at the Capitol

Artist’s War Painting Is Not Correct in Military Detail, Say Soldiers Who Know.

Although the painting by Stanley M. Arthurs of Wilmington, Ind., placed this week in the governor’s waiting room at the state capitol, is satisfactory from a technical standpoint, critics have been busy ever since its hanging.

It is another war picture depicting the Third regiment, United States volunteers, entering Little Rock, Ark. The regiment is shown crossing the Arkansas river on a pontoon bridge and marching up the levee by route step.

Col. C. C. Andrews commanding. The chief feature of the picture, as brought out by the artist, is the youth of the soldiers.

Just soldiers who took part in the events are not pleased with the painting in many respects. It is said that the blankets are not properly arranged. The officer who was with the army during the war pointed out that late in the war the blankets were rolled around the shoulders as worn in the Arthur picture, but at the time the Third regiment entered Little Rock the blankets were folded on top of the knapsack.

In Mr. Arthur’s picture musicians are shown marching ahead of the column, and it is explained that in reality no one marched ahead of the officer in command.

Some have also sought to attack the artist for putting in two color banners, but it was pointed out by General Andrews, then colonel of the regiment, that one flag is of the nation and the other of the state, and that the artist is entirely correct in putting in two flags.
Battle of Gettysburg

First Minnesota veterans of the Gettysburg charge down Cemetery Ridge reenact where they fought and were wounded on July 2, 1863. The rocky terrain is portrayed front and center in the painting.

Photo: about 1897 (Minnesota Historical Society)
Fourth Minnesota Entering Vicksburg

Francis Millett, *Fourth Minnesota Entering Vicksburg*, painted 1904

Warren County Courthouse, Vicksburg, Mississippi, about 1864

(photo: Vicksburg’s Old Court House Museum)
Battle of Corinth

Edwin Blashfield, *Battle of Corinth*, painted 1912

Father John Ireland, about 1862

Colonel Lucius Hubbard, about 1865
Attack on New Ulm

Anton Gag, *Attack on New Ulm*, painted 1904

Dakota House, about 1865.

This building served as a hospital during the attacks on New Ulm and is depicted on the extreme right edge and center of the painting.
Eighth Minnesota at the Battle of Ta-Ha-Kouty

Carl Boeckmann, *Eighth Minnesota at the Battle of Ta-Ha-Kouty*, painted 1910
Treaty of Traverse des Sioux


Minnesota State Capitol


Minnesota Historical Society

This painting is based on Mayer’s sketches as an eyewitness to the event in 1851.
When this painting was completed, the falls, due to it receding upriver no longer existed in this natural state. Based on his studies, Volk took care to include Spirit Island in the center of the falls.
Letter: Douglas Volk to Cass Gilbert, August 1904.

This letter helps illustrate the process between architect and artist to determine accurate information and details for this painting.
of St. Anthony, we perceived five or six Indians who had taken the start, one of whom had climbed a tree and was wearing a beaver robe and ac. ac. ac.

Hennepin also says in his "New Discovery" page 227: "This extreme want made us take a resolution, upon Michel Ako's refusing to accompany us, to venture ourselves in a little sorry canoe as far as the river Gueconsin"........ "But Michel Ako who was apprehensive of the many hardships he was like to meet with on the expedition could never be prevailed upon to consent to it, so that seeing that he began to relish the Barbarians way of living, I desired their chief, that I might have leave to accompany Picard in his stead who accordingly granted my request." ac. ac.

The following quotation from Parkman's "La Salle and the Discovery of the great Northwest", page 266 - indicates his interpretations of the foregoing. "Du Gay wished to go with him, but Accon who liked the Indian life as much as he disliked Hennepin preferred to remain with the hunters." ....

"Thus equipped they began their journey and soon approached the Falls of St. Anthony. .... As they were carrying their canoe by the Cataract they saw five or six Indians." ac. ac.

The account given in the "Golden Jubilee" book, page 12 is of course very brief - and though it speaks of the two voyageurs starting with Hennepin, it does not mention the stop made at the mouth of the Rum river, and the split in the party which took place at that point. The picture of the scene at the falls which is introduced, and which shows two white men with Hennepin, seems therefore, according to my best judgment to be inaccurate, but if I am at error on this point I shall be only to glad to be set right.

Now with regard to the position of the party at the Falls. I confess this point has been a most perplexing one, for it is most difficult sometimes to make fact accord with harmonious arrangement, you say that the Falls appear to be below Hennepin, and I was glad the sketch gave such an impression for that is where I wanted to suggest them as being, though I would like to have greater latitude in the matter, and perhaps place the party differently, but the fact is the carry led over the bluff, which according to Pike's survey in 1806 was about 60 feet high, with an elevation at the point of disembarkation of 45 degrees. The beginning of the lower end of the carry was, as near as I can figure out from the accounts written by the explorers about 500 ft. below the falls, and possibly it was a good deal more in Hennepin's
Father Hennepin at the Falls of St. Anthony

...time, for the recession of the falls has since that period amounted over 1000 feet. Thus the brink of the falls when our missionary stood there was about at the southern end of Hennepin Island, the water therefore would have been very turbulent in the channel which is narrow at this point, and the beginning of the trail therefore would have been lower down the river. Thus an observer standing on the shore at this particular point would find himself at a considerable distance from the Cañon... I also gather from the what Hennepin says, “As we were making the portage, &c. and from Parkman, “As they were carrying their canoes by the falls,” &c. that in view of the fact that Hennepin was coming down the river he must have stopped to view the scene before he reached the end of the trail, and consequently must have looked down upon it from the cliff, but I have taken, and shall take, in line with your suggestions, as much license as possible, and assume that the group was at a point not too high above the river. Then the thought occurred to me that Hennepin would be a more commanding figure a little above the scene, relieved against the sky, than he would with a turbulent background such as would be inevitable if he were on a level with the mass of falling water.

The whole problem is difficult...
Father Hennepin at the Falls of St. Anthony

of an idea of it until you see the cartoon.

There is nothing more picturesque perhaps, then fur, and I would enjoy painting a fur cap on Picard du Ray, as you suggest, but how about it in July? It would be all right here to night, for it is cold enough for an overcoat, but if you think a coon skin will go, I will be glad to put one on the Picard. I have found just the type for this personage.

Hennepin is going to be a stunning figure to do, and I have a fine old Monks gown, that looks as if it had been worn through miles of forest.

If you can find time will you let me know what you think of the advisability of my asking Archbishop Ireland's opinion regarding the cross and Hennepin's ceremonials attitude?

I marvel at your being able to keep so many things going at once, and I hesitate to encroach on your time, but if you can tell me whether what I have written seems plausible or not, I will be greatly obliged. What you wrote concerning the elevation of the falls is vital, and "gives me pause". If you feel strongly about it, I shall be tempted to try a new setting to the composition, for I value your artistic judgment most sincerely.

I was much pleased to receive a letter from Mr. Seabury, in which he says he went...
Discoverers and Civilizers Led to the Source of the Mississippi