

The Current Visual Art Collection

May 6, 2016

The Current Visual Art Collection vs. the Adopted Vision Statement

The current art in the Capitol has evolved over time in response to a variety of factors. Much was commissioned, others were gifts, but for some other pieces the addition process is less clear, and in recent times the primary decision to add art has been made by legislative action. (A listing of the current pieces starts on page ___ of the Appendix).

1. Original art - The art commissioned for the opening of the Capitol in 1905 or soon after.
History: (Include Cass Gilbert quotes)
Art added by 1906: 55 murals adhered to the walls, 7 paintings and 7 statues
2. Art added from 1907 to 1915: 4 paintings, 4 statues, 2 busts, 5 plaques
3. Art added from 1916 to 1943: 2 murals, 1 painting, 2 portraits, 7 plaques
4. Governors' portraits tradition in the corridors starts in 1944 with currently a total of 38 portraits
5. Art added: 1945 to present: 1 portrait, 10 busts, 3 plaques
2 busts in the Senate Chamber and 1 bust in the South Dome area have unknown dates of placement.

Art by theme

Assessing the current visual collection against the adopted Capitol art vision statement

After confirming public support through 11 public hearings throughout the state and an on-line survey, the following statement was adopted by the full Capitol Preservation Commission:

The purpose of art in the Minnesota State Capitol is to tell Minnesota stories.

Works of art in the Capitol should engage people to:

- Reflect on our state's history
- Understand our government
- Recognize the contributions of our diverse peoples
- Inspire citizen engagement
- Appreciate the varied landscapes of our state.

Reflect on our state's history

The art that has traditionally been displayed in the Capitol incompletely reflects Minnesota's history, as no works depict Minnesota earlier than 1680 or later than 1905, with the exception of Governors' portraits, plaques, and memorials.

A significant number of busts and portraits of non-governors are in the collection, and some Minnesota legislators, but others are non-elected or more tied to national events than Minnesota's history. These displays have little or no interpretation and thus convey little about the person's contribution to Minnesota. It has been recommended that the Governors' portraits be interpreted in a way that conveys the context of the times in which they served. Should that be extended to these as well?

Understanding our government

Allegorical art (in the large elevated painted murals and the Quadriga) speaks to the values and aspirations of our state and democracy. But these representations generally need interpretation to be understood. The evolution of law in the Supreme Court Chamber is more directly understood but many visitors may not have the background to understand the stories without explanation.

The quotations on the second level introduce literary art and serve to guide and inspire decision making more than to explain our government. The role of citizens in elections and in inspiring actions and priorities, the interactions of the two legislative bodies and the role of the governor and other constitutional officers and their partnership in making change happen is not portrayed via art (or conveyed effectively in other easily accessible ways to visitors, except tour guides often give some basics).

Inspiring citizen engagement

While the Capitol is often referred to as “the people’s house” with easy access, none of the art demonstrates the role of citizens in electing the people who serve there or how their input and actions inspire law making and priority setting.

Recognize the contribution of our diverse peoples

The current collection has only three women by name who lived in Minnesota (two on plaques and one first lady) and has hardly visible recognition of Minnesota’s diversity in race, ethnicity, disability status, age, etc.

Art in the Capitol inadequately honors the native peoples living in Minnesota for millennia before initial white contact in the late 17th century. The portrayals of American Indians in some paintings of early Minnesota state history have proven controversial. Wabasha and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. are both portrayed in busts.

There is a statue of a German immigrant couple and the Rathskeller reflects that significant group of early immigrants. The waves of various groups of European nationalities, followed by other groups including African Americans, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and African Immigrants within the past 200 years is not reflected.

Appreciate the varied landscapes of our state

Landscape views of Minnesota are scarce. They are incidentally provided in the “The Treaty of Traverse des Sioux,” and “Attack on New Ulm” paintings and in the background of some of the allegorical works. Some specific buildings in Minnesota are portrayed in the non-public corridors on the sides of the House Chamber. Landscapes of other states are shown in Civil War paintings and the “Eighth Minnesota at the Battle of Ta-Ha-Kouty (Killdeer Mountain)” painting.

Landscape murals are also in areas of rest and reflection as reflected in the woods and wetland mural that surrounds the House Retiring Room, and the murals in the Governor and Court Dining Rooms: “Old Fort Charlotte on the Pigeon River” and the “Untitled (River Fishing Scene).”

Landscapes of Minnesota’s diverse regions and its more than 11,000 lakes are not featured. Aspects of natural components of our state are tucked into the railings, decorative woodwork, and decorative paintings and are a fun way to see glimpses of gophers (the state symbol), eagles, maple and oak leaves, corn, and lady slippers (the state flower).

Summary

To summarize, the current collection has the following gaps in fulfilling the adopted vision: historical achievements past 1905, art that helps in understanding our government and the role of its citizens in shaping its priorities, art featuring women and the diverse peoples of Minnesota, and landscapes.

Possible recommendations to help address the identified gaps in the current collection

Reflecting our state's history

- 1) The broad history of our state needs to go beyond 1905.
 - a) Space must be reserved for the state's history over the next 150 years or more.
 - b) The evolution of Minnesota history and significant events can be conveyed through the contextualized interpretation of the Governors' portraits and the times they served.
 - b) One picture topic should be selected for every 20-year period to convey an event or force that changed Minnesota history, its natural life, or the life of its people uniquely (vs national events).
 - c) To gain the perspective of time and remove personal or political considerations, the focus of each period shall not be selected until at least 50 years have passed or at least 30 years in the case of Governors.
 - d) For significant collections, such as Early Days in Minnesota History and the Civil War, designating specific rooms to focus on these collections (and perhaps others) would allow for more focused attention and interpretation than the current scattering of these pieces in different parts of the building.
 - e) Provide a means for the public to understand why various individuals are honored with a bust or portrait.

Understanding our government

- 1) Major policy achievements should be told in a way that shows ordinary Minnesotans and the role of government.

For example: Missouri is proud that it was the first state to offer kindergarten to all children. It has a mural in its Capitol that shows the teacher who first advocated it in a classroom of the time surrounded by young children. It's an easy way to share a story of state leadership, how the idea came from an ordinary citizen, and how it took both the legislature and the Governor to make it happen after listening to many voices. It also allows the showing of a woman citizen leader, children and potentially some diversity.

 - a. Topics selected should convey a Minnesota policy change that shaped the state's future significantly, had a major impact on the lives of its citizens, or was a model for actions adopted by others throughout the nation.
 - b. No more than one achievement per 20-year period, selected after 50 years have passed.
- 2) Consider ways art could be used to convey the interconnectedness and partnership required across the major bodies of government to make a change, starting from a citizen's perspective. Maybe an interactive experience?

Inspiring citizen engagement

Possible topics that could be conveyed visually

- 1) Women's suffrage. Minnesota's leadership in granting women the right to vote in school board elections via a Minnesota constitutional amendment in 1875. Voting over time.
- 2) Contacting a legislator. Dear Rep.... and Sen..... (at a writing desk, at a computer, on an old phone, etc.)

- 3) Coming to the Capitol to rally and share priorities.
- 4) Noting achievements in “understanding government” above when the idea came from a citizen.

Recognize the contributions of our diverse peoples

- 1) Convey the life of American Indians before the white people came to Minnesota and in the modern era.
- 2) Whenever appropriate to the story being told, new art shall reflect the involvement of women, persons of color, persons of various ages, and other Minnesotans under-represented in the original and current collection.
- 3) Can the diversity of the immigrants that have made Minnesota home over time be told in a way that doesn't require each and every community to be reflected? Or can all be conveyed via the flags of their country of origin? Given the many changes that have taken place in country boundaries and names over time, what other approaches can reflect this global contribution to our diversity and vitality?

Appreciate the varied landscapes of our state

- 1) To assure geographic balance to the various places Minnesotans live in the scenes conveyed, consideration should be given to scenes from each congressional district.
- 2) Just as Cass Gilbert placed landscapes in places of relaxation and refreshment (the House Retiring Room, the Governor's and Court's small dining rooms), the new spaces for dining in the lower level and on the second floor should address the desire to have visitors see more views of Minnesota's varied landscapes.
- 3) As the main reception room for honored guests from elsewhere in Minnesota and other parts of the world, consideration should be given to also featuring landscapes of Minnesota in the anteroom to the Governor's Reception Room.
- 4) Since Minnesota has never had a shortage of talented landscape artists, this may be one area where some changeover in the art can be accomplished on a schedule, while retaining diversity of subject matter and artist.