

Fellow Capitolians,

Today, whilst on my bike trip, I stopped to see the Montana State Capitol in Helena and took the tour. Built around the same time as the Minnesota State Capitol, it was remodeled to be "modern" in the 1960's, then restored in 2001 to as close to original as possible. It does have some very prominent art on display, and in a similar fashion to possessing some pieces that are permanently a part of the building, but many that are added pieces representing the history of Montana. Some lessons learned:



In the 2001 restoration, the question never came up about controversial art, even though one prominent piece is of the Battle of Little Bighorn entitled "Custer's Last Stand" by Edgar Samuel Paxson (1852-1919). There are several pieces that could, in our estimation, be deemed controversial, but as a matter of fact, the builders recognized the importance of the Native American communities, and they play a big part in the art of the Montana Capitol, largely representing their culture.

The docent I had talked to about this, and employee of the Montana Historical Society, indicated that the Montana Historical Society convened a two-day conference with tribal leaders and scholars to learn "how to discuss" the American Indian culture appropriately. Her takeaway, which I found interesting, was that the American Indians basically said they cannot be insulted, so the white person does not know half of the true American Indian culture there, much of which is off limits to whites (sweat lodges, etc.). But the American Indian community is proud of the heritage represented in the Montana Capitol art.



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- Some of the art is very valuable, especially a huge Charles Russell painting of a minor Lewis and Clark event that adorns the House Chamber backdrop, featuring American Indian and white cultures side by side. It is considered the masterpiece within the Montana Capitol, saved for last on the tour.



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- Whomever believes that bronze "plaques" do not constitute art, should look at the massive bas relief bronze that adorns the Senate backdrop - a piece of art exquisite in detail and storytelling of another Lewis and Clark scene. We should NOT limit ourselves folks.



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- There is some framed art, and some busts, but not all of state legislators. A most prominent sculpture is of Senator Mike Mansfield, along with his wife, as one of the statesman of Montana.



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- Consistent with some of the themes we have discussed. There are two commissioned pieces, one representing women's suffrage and politics, the other of families.



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- The Montana Capitol's "Traverse de Sioux" painting prominently displayed in the Senate chamber is, interestingly enough, of Jefferson and Napoleon signing the Louisiana Purchase (and not particularly well done, in my opinion).



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- The State Capitol is certainly the same symbol for Montana as ours is to Minnesota, that much is clear. Even the driving of the last spike (and as it turns out, the first spike brought in for the occasion) completing the Northern Pacific transcontinental railroad line holds an important place represented in art, with Ulysses S. Grant depicted doing the honors.



More lessons learned. For your information.

BTW: Another Cass Gilbert building is in downtown Helena!

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