

Statement from Rep. Dean Urdahl on Art in the Capitol

It has been my pleasure to have worked with the Art Subcommittee during our State Capitol restoration. I find many areas of agreement but have some items that I have problems with. I have included some of my thoughts as follows. In some I wish to highlight positions taken by the Subcommittee and in other comments I wish to offer alternative thoughts.

1. The Capitol is a historic building. It is on the National Register of Historic Places because of Cass Gilbert and his vision. Part of our task in this restoration project has been to restore Gilbert's vision.
2. The art in the Governor's Reception Room was intended by Gilbert to be permanent. It was built into the wall, with frames added around the canvas after it was installed.
3. Minnesota's story is being told through the art. The story is not always pretty, nor is it complete. But it is our history.
4. It was intent of the authors of the restoration project and of most who voted for it that this be a restoration project and not a revisionist project.
5. The debate over paintings has led to dispute over attire, interpretation, meanings of words (such as genocide or concentration camp) and other issues. The fact is we will not be able to resolve these issues to everyone's satisfaction. There are numerous interpretations about what the art works depict. What we must do is move forward.
6. There is an opinion by some that any art that offends should be removed from the Capitol. It is important to consider that literally all art offends someone. Therefore a case could be made that all art should be removed. We must be sensitive to people's feelings about this.

Outcomes:

With the aforementioned in mind, I believe we should recommend:

1. Leave permanently affixed paintings in their present capitol locations. We must do a better job of signage, interpretation and context. For example, I believe that the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux should be treated as an education opportunity for people to learn how and why this land was obtained. To move the painting to a more obscure location would be a lost opportunity to teach. The painting was made from eye witness accounts and is highly accurate in its depictions. Certainly the interpretation or symbolism is up to debate, but that is the case of most art.

The painting depicting Father Hennepin at St. Anthony Falls has great symbolism in representing European exploration of Minnesota. It is also important to the Catholic Church and their role in early Minnesota settlement. Was there, or could there have been, a topless young woman there? It may have been, in his book on his exploration Hennepin does give reference to partially clad native people. But regardless, there are other depictions of similarly clad people in the capitol.

According to Brian Pease of the Minnesota State Historical Society, "The focus of "Father Hennepin" was to tell part of the state's early history. There's a value of bringing forward that story of early French exploration and people who were looking for the source of the Mississippi."

He adds that this painting also highlights the importance of the Mississippi River and of St. Anthony Falls for the future Minneapolis flour milling industry and the state's economy.

While the historical accuracy of these two paintings is placed into question by some, I believe that they are well researched and in most respects quite accurate. Remember that they were painted through the lens of the time and that some view them differently today.

2. Those paintings that have moved in the past could be moved again and find new homes within the capitol. Once again, interpretation is important.
3. We must recognize and display the story of more recent ethnic groups in Minnesota history. The Ojibbway story is ignored presently, as are other peoples. New art work and historic interpretation in the new spaces must reflect the changes in Minnesota's story and offer alternative interpretations of our past. For example, a Dakota depiction of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux could be accompanied by a print of the reception room version with different accounts and interpretations.
4. Legacy funding could be used to contribute to new art.
5. The governor's portraits should remain in the capitol. I endorse the thought that there be a grouping of their portraits in which time lines and historical interpretation tell the story of what was happening in the State and country during each governor's term of office. We also need a standard size for the portraits.
6. We should explore modern technology uses in our efforts to better interpret our State's and Capitol's history.
7. The American Civil War is the seminal moment in our nation's history. It could be argued that Minnesota's most significant role in our nation's story related to that war. Our Capitol reflects our participation in many ways. I believe it is important to hold dear memories of the Civil War as commemorated on the walls and hall ways of the Capitol. Therefore, I would not recommend moving the statues, rotunda display of artifacts and battle flags, or the paintings in the Governor's Ante Room.
8. I agree with the sentiment that it is important to have a long range plan and funding mechanism for the Capitol's future needs.
9. Continuing to tell Minnesota's story through new art and interpretation is a must.

Dean Urdahl
State Representative, District 18A
473 State Office Bldg
100 The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd
St. Paul, MN 55155
Phone: 651.296.4344