

**Statement on the
Report of the Minnesota Capitol Art Subcommittee**

**Gwen N. Westerman, PhD
Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota
Minnesota State University, Mankato**

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After months of research and deliberation, as well as input from the public, the Art Subcommittee has submitted its final report to the Capitol Restoration Board. Five kinds of art were identified in the Capitol: allegorical, historical, functional, memorial, and decorative. From the outset, the five paintings depicting the Native peoples of Minnesota were referred to as “historic” and “controversial.” The power of art to influence perception of the history of our state is real.

On September 14, 2015, a presentation to the Subcommittee focused on the historical accuracy and, in some cases, the romanticization of the paintings depicting the eight Minnesota regiments activated during the Civil War. The presenter concluded with a comment about audience reception to these works: “Imagine seeing yourself or your family members depicted in these paintings in the State Capitol and the pride you might feel.”

On October 12, 2015, I made a presentation on the “controversial” art. We spent more than an hour going through each of the paintings and their contexts. As a teacher and an artist, I used a critical response approach to art and asked the Subcommittee members present to look carefully at the paintings and to respond to what they **saw**—not what they thought they knew about the history. For some members, it was new information that these works were tribally specific, rather than generic “Native American art.” I then asked them to look at the paintings from the perspective of a Dakota or Ojibwe viewer, and said, “Now, imagine seeing yourself or your family members depicted in these paintings in the State Capitol, and how you might feel.” It was a revealing moment for most of them to have to consider these works from a viewpoint other than their own.

Just how are Dakota people depicted in the art of the State Capitol? They are shown through a constructed myth of the primitive savage in direct conflict with advancing “civilization.” Given their prominence in the Governor’s Reception Room, the large paintings of *Father Hennepin at the Falls of St Anthony* and *Treaty of Traverse des Sioux* are more often than not viewed by visitors without the aid of adequate interpretative text that explains what they are seeing—half-naked Indians in feathers, animal skins, and blankets from the distant past before Minnesota was a state. In the Senate Chambers, *Discoverers and Civilizers Led to the Source of the Mississippi* is comprised of similar romanticized images of Indians who attempt to ward off the “Spirit of Discovery” and the “Spirit of Civilization” which bring religion and settlement. These three paintings tacitly endorse the belief that Native peoples in Minnesota failed to adapt to so-called progress and are barely relevant to the development of the state.

Our society remains constrained by images that depict Indians as violent, treacherous, and racially inferior, and by a reliance on warfare as the chronological markers of history. The other two paintings, *Attack on New Ulm* and *Eighth Minnesota at the Battle of Ta-Ha-Kouty*, lack interpretative text about the actual events portrayed and viewers see only savage Indians engaged in war against white citizens. This is how Dakota people are depicted in the Capitol, and it often serves as justification for continued vilification of our Dakota people today.

Of these five specific works, four relate directly to the depiction of Dakota history in Minnesota, and one is a conflation of Dakota and Ojibwe traditional histories with the “discovery” of the headwaters of the Mississippi. I have consistently referred to these works as “problematic” rather than “controversial.” From my observations, it appears that what creates “controversy” here is a perception that a white interpretation of this complex and multi-faceted history is the only “truthful” representation, and that there is no room for other perspectives. A small and very vocal group of citizens believes that any challenge to the representation of these events is an attack on their own versions, and that these “historic” paintings must remain in the State Capitol, regardless of the inaccuracies in their depictions.

There is resistance to acknowledging an indigenous perspective of Minnesota history. In a later Subcommittee meeting, the responses of our tribal leaders and the Indian Advisory Committee of the Minnesota Historical Society were dismissed as just the “same as every other marginalized group in the state—Black Lives Matter, environmentalists, mining companies.” A subcommittee member who found “one Dakota man who said this painting [*Treaty of Traverse des Sioux*] makes him proud,” remarked that “the Native Americans can’t come to a consensus on what to do with this art, so we should leave it where it is.” Yet, consensus was never considered a requirement for any other group of Minnesotans regarding the art in the State Capitol.

What many Dakota people and their numerous non-Native allies across the state have agreed on is the negative impact the paintings in the Governor’s Reception Room have on all the visitors to Capitol, especially the thousands of school children who visit each year. These paintings should be moved to an area where complete interpretative materials can provide context and help our citizens understand their relevance and their limitations. The art in the State Capitol shapes the perception of the history of our state. It is time to move the paintings of the stereotyped uncivilized and savage Indian—we are human beings with a rich and enduring culture. It is time to remind our citizens that they speak the language of our Dakota people every time they say the name of our state, Minnesota, and that we are indeed an integral part of its history and its future.