



Subcommittee on Capitol Art

Preliminary Report to the Minnesota State Capitol Preservation Commission



February 2016

I. Executive Summary of the Art Subcommittee

A. Overview

The Minnesota State Capitol is a currently undergoing its first comprehensive restoration since it opened in 1905.

- The Minnesota Capitol is one of America’s most grand and beautiful public buildings and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. However, by 2011 it was in great need of preservation due to leaking roofs, marble deterioration, antiquated building systems, inadequate accessibility, inadequate public facilities (bathrooms, dining services, gathering spaces), and other challenges of adapting an old ornate building to meet modern needs.
- The Minnesota State Capitol Preservation Commission adopted three guiding principles for the restoration project: architectural integrity, life safety, and building functionality.



Figure 1 The Capitol Restoration Project is a massive interior and exterior repair, restoration and renovation initiative

The historic State Capitol Restoration Project provides an unprecedented opportunity to review the conservation, placement and display of art in the Capitol.

- The historic restoration of the Minnesota Capitol has received broad bi-partisan support.
- Minnesotans strongly identify with and cherish their State Capitol. They have demonstrated a keen interest in the restoration project as evidenced by regular media coverage, website participation, Facebook likes, and other social media usage.

Art in the Capitol has generated substantial public interest, comment and discussion.

- The Commission became aware that some of the existing art in the Capitol, created in the 1900s to embody the noble concepts of history, civic education, duty, honor, valor and sacrifice, has also come to invoke feelings of hurt, pain, suffering and loss for certain segments of Minnesota's modern population, especially many of our American Indian citizens.
- Depictions of American Indians in the Capitol are frequently described as being inaccurate and romanticized. Some Minnesotans believe that some existing art is insensitive to the loss experienced by these communities or their cultural values of respect for women.

Existing art is both a reflection of specific time periods in Minnesota's history, as well as more generic allegorical works. The Capitol's works of art are not a comprehensive depiction of Minnesota's history.

- Most existing Capitol art reflects the Beaux Arts vision of the architect, as well as Minnesota's first 47 years of statehood. The Capitol was built within memory of Minnesota's heroic contributions to the Civil War and some of the art and monuments prominently honor those contributions in important areas of the Capitol.
- While the tradition of hanging Governors' portraits in the corridors of the Capitol began in the 1940s, the portraits by themselves do not tell much of Minnesota's story at the time of each Governor's service. Contemporary interpretive techniques can build upon previous interpretive efforts.

Some original Art has experienced movement, change, and alteration over time.

Examples:

- The painting "Father Hennepin at the Falls of St. Anthony" was first placed on the west wall of the Governor's Reception Room, and then six months later, in November 1905, moved to the east wall of the same room.

- The mural above the West Grand Stairs, "The Sacred Flame (Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow)" (1903) by Henry Oliver Walker, was altered in the 1930s to a point where the original mural design is not recoverable by conservators.
- The non-original portrait of George Washington was first installed on the wall behind the President of the Senate desk after the 1959 redecoration of the Senate Chamber. Since the 1980s, it has moved to different locations including Room 125, Room 235, and Room 229. This painting has been under control of the Minnesota Senate, and is not considered one of the significant works of art in the main collection.
- The paintings "Battle of Ta-Ka-Houty" and "Attack on New Ulm" have each been located at various locations within the Capitol since their initial installations in the early 1900s.

New art has been added to the Capitol over the past 90 years; primarily Governors' portraits and art honoring notable Minnesotans (mostly men and three women).

- Of the 149 total pieces of existing art, 73 had been installed in the Capitol by 1915 and the remaining 76 were installed in the 90 years since.
- Only three notable women who have lived in Minnesota are featured in the current body of art (two on plaques and one with her husband in a Governor's portrait).
- The Commission discussed the potential for more inclusive and engaging ways to use art to showcase Minnesota's history, diversity, and to tell more modern Minnesota stories.
- The newly restored Capitol will have more places, including space which could be used for an art gallery, for public gathering and the display of art. These provide new opportunities to tell more Minnesota stories to the estimated 300,000 visitors each year.



Figure 2 - Art added after 1905 includes Governors' portraits plaques and busts, like this one of Sen. Nicholas D. Coleman

The Subcommittee heard from experts in both history and art.

- Early on in its discussions, the Subcommittee understood that in order to honor and fulfill its mandate, it needed to educate itself in the history and architectural design features of the Capitol, the restoration process, and the nature of existing, new and found public spaces in the Capitol.
- It learned about the existing art and its condition from Minnesota Historical Society specialists and gained significant information from other State and local experts.

- It also, with the help of its members, reviewed the art and art policies of a large sampling of other State Capitols.

Minnesotans love their State Capitol. Over 3,000 offered their ideas and feedback on the role of art in the Capitol.

- As many Minnesotans view the State Capitol as the “People’s House,” the Subcommittee considered the public’s priorities, perspectives and opinions to be important.
- Capitol art can play a significant role in promoting citizen engagement and in introducing our state to local, national and international visitors.
- The Subcommittee undertook a comprehensive outreach effort to educate the public and solicit public input.

This is a Preliminary Report. The work of the Subcommittee is ongoing. The Subcommittee plans to submit a final report with final recommendations to the Commission in late summer or early fall 2016.

- The Subcommittee has concluded that this preliminary report to the Commission is an important and necessary part of its process.
- This preliminary report to the Commission, shares discoveries to date, provides insight into the space available to display art, provides information on existing art in the Capitol, and summarizes the public input received.
- This background will assist the Subcommittee as it continues its efforts toward submitting a final report and recommendations.

The Subcommittee thanks all of the volunteers, experts, and Subcommittee members who have contributed to this important work.

- The Subcommittee is a voluntary body that serves without pay, mileage reimbursement, per diem, or operating budget. It functions with assistance from the Department of Administration and has received help from the Minnesota Historical Society, the CAAP Board, and other State agencies. Many members of the public have shared their time, talents, and help.
- The combined efforts of these parties expanded the Subcommittee’s work to help us fulfill the enthusiastic expectations of the public for a more inviting and engaging experience at the Capitol in learning about our State and contributing to its future.

B. Preliminary Recommendations

Based on the information, input and discussion to date, the Subcommittee has adopted the following preliminary recommendations.

Except for the Vision Statement and the recommendation seeking funding, all other recommendations are open to ongoing refinement as the Subcommittee continues gathering information about available spaces, approaches to interpretation and telling the story of Minnesota, policy issues and guidelines, and exploring other opportunities.

The final recommendations will be outlined further in the Subcommittee's final report.

1. **The display and interpretation of the art should engage visitors and inspire return trips to the Capitol**
 - There needs to be improved and engaging interpretation of much of the art.
 - The renovated Capitol should have installations that can evolve and change over time.
 - Some new policies need to be developed in regard to the Capitol, and there should be periodic review of all policies.

2. **Retain prominent display of some art related to the Civil War**
 - The four Civil War paintings should remain in the Governor's Reception Room.
 - The Civil War flags should remain in the Capitol. They should be in the Rotunda, on a rotating basis, for the reopening but other possible long-term placement may be a part of future discussions.

3. **The tradition of having the Governors' portraits should continue in the Capitol but be displayed in new ways.**
 - Governors' portraits should be displayed in a way that enables contextualizing them and providing meaningful interpretation.
 - Size and style guidelines should be reviewed, revised, and adhered to.

4. **Relocate some art depicting American Indians**
 - Tribal leaders and historical experts shall be solicited to participate in the interpretation of works of art with American Indian content.
 - Move the "Father Hennepin at the Falls of St. Anthony" painting from the Governor's Reception Room and relocate it within the State Capitol with appropriate interpretation.
 - Move "The Treaty of Traverse des Sioux" painting from the Governor's Reception Room and relocate it within the State Capitol with appropriate interpretation.



Figure 3 - "Father Hennepin at the Falls of St. Anthony"



Figure 4 - "The Treaty of Traverse des Sioux"

5. **Certain areas are not subject to consideration**
 - While some Minnesotans have raised concerns regarding the fine art work within the House and Senate Chambers, the Subcommittee defers to those bodies to determine art content within legislative Chambers.

6. **All Capitol art is a State asset**

- All of the art* in the current collection has a historic and artistic value and should remain in State or Minnesota Historical Society ownership and be preserved. (*Capitol art is defined broadly in [Minnesota Statutes 138.68](#))

7. **Funding should be provided for basic art infrastructure and conservation and interpretation**

- The Subcommittee requests funds for art hanging, display, and security systems, design support, and architectural wall elevations that will support current and future placement decisions. *
- Since the funding secured for fine art conservation has proven inadequate, additional funding for conservation should be authorized so the work can be completed during the restoration. *
- Robust interpretation of works of art and other public programs in the Capitol will require funding that would be both one-time and ongoing. We recommend that this funding should be provided.

* The 2015 Legislature designated bond funds for additional Capitol Restoration work and this request is already before the Preservation Commission for consideration.