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MSU prof questions Gag's 'Attack on New Ulm' painting

Opponents call it censorship

November 20, 2015

By Fritz Busch - Staff Writer , The Journal

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MANKATO - A Minnesota State University, Mankato English and humanities professor and member of the Minnesota State Capitol Preservation Commission Art Subcommittee takes issue with New Ulm native Anton Gag's "Attack on New Ulm" painting.

The painting has been displayed in the Capitol for decades, but it and other paintings have been put in storage during the renovation of the building.

Dr. Gwen Westerman, a Dakota educator, writer and artist, said at a subcommittee meeting last month that Gag's portrayal of a Dakota siege on the (New Ulm) Minnesota settlement during the Dakota War of 1862 wasn't correct due to "the warriors' shirtless attire" and "the nearly identical men further the stereotype that Dakota people are a faceless menace."

Article Photos



This painting by Anton Gag entitled 'Attack on New Ulm' ha...

"When we come to this place and see our family members depicted in these paintings, how must we feel?" she asked at the meeting.

Other concerns with the State Capitol's art collection unfairly depicting American Indians included Dakota warriors with feathered headdresses riding into a village, and a bare-chested woman. These artworks create more of a cowboys-and-Indians image than an accurate historical record.

The subcommittee didn't make any final decisions in October. Recommendations are not expected until January 2016. The Capitol is set to reopen in 2017.

Options being considered are adding placards to add critical historical context to images, correcting perceived inaccuracies, placing other paintings in Capitol galleries that depict Native Americans positively or removing offensive paintings completely.

Meanwhile, local Wanda Gag House Association President Sharon L. Glotzbach of New Ulm opposes any move to hid Gag's painting "Attack on New Ulm."

In a letter dated Thursday, Nov. 19, to Minnesota House art subcommittee member, author and former history teacher Dean Urdahl, Westerman and the 13 other subcommittee members, Glotzbach described the other side of the story in detail.

"On behalf of the Wanda Gag House Association (WGHA), and our more than 120 members in Minnesota and throughout the United States, I strongly object to the proposal to censor the art in our Capitol and specially Anton Gag's "Attack on New Ulm."

"It is alleged that, among other things, the clothing of the Dakota in the painting is inaccurate in that they are shirtless. There is ample evidence that Anton Gag interviewed both Dakota and surviving defenders who were present at the attack so that his presentation would be authentic. (Today's accusers are at a serious disadvantage because no survivors of the battle are alive now 153 years later).

"It is well established that Gag traveled to Morton numerous times to interview Dakota participants. Dakota posed for Gag so he could draw and paint the likeness of each sitter, and they received in return a duplicate painting of themselves for their cooperation. Further, Gag visited the Minnesota Historical Society to do research there early in 1887.

"Today's accusers have little historical grounds to challenge Gag's portrayal of the Dakota attack on New Ulm. They seem to be dealing in opinion, not fact, hardly a basis for censorship of both art and history.

"It is the mission of the WGHA to preserve, protect, and interpret

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