



Local historians urge Capitol to keep art depicting U.S.-Dakota Conflict

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By Clay Schuldt

NEW ULM - Local historians and a special interest group in New Ulm are pushing members of the legislative Capitol Art Subcommittee to keep key art works on display at the Capitol in St. Paul. The artworks are Anton Gag's "The First Battle of New Ulm" and the "Treaty of Traverse des Sioux" by Francis Millet.

The state capitol, which is undergoing a complete renovation, will reopen in 2017 with increased public space to accommodate new art. Some view this situation as an opportunity to review and discuss existing capitol art that some individuals feel is insensitive and not representative of Minnesota today.

Recently, art subcommittee member Sen. David Senjem, R-Rochester, said at a November meeting in Mankato that some people feel the capitol art is insensitive and does not represent Native Americans respectfully.

In response two letters were submitted to the subcommittee. The first letter came from the Brown County Historical Society (BCHS), and the second was from Family and Friends of Dakota Uprising victims and several independent historians including Curtis Dahlin, George Glotzbach, Corinee Monjeau-Marz, Don Heinrich Tolzmann, Elroy Ubl, Bryce Stenzel, Craig Duehring, Darla Cordes Gebhard and Jon Willand.

Both letters urged the committee to maintain paintings currently on display, citing a need to represent a part of Minnesota's past and educate the public. The letter from BCHS read: "Art can be a compelling tool to help educate and provide understanding of where we are as a culture today."

Bob Burgess, director of the BCHS, expanded on this stance in a later interview. He said these paintings were a vital spring board to understanding what happened in Minnesota's history and explaining the journey to current times.

"The minute those art pieces go off display we lose something. Off the wall and off the mind," Burgess said.

The prevailing concern is that in an effort to be politically correct the memory of the U.S. Dakota Conflict of 1862 could be lost. Burgess said that the museum encourages the capitol to provide a fair and balanced interpretation of the conflict through the additions to the collection.

"We would help the committee with the next step," he said.

The letter from Family and Friends of Dakota Uprising echoed the BCHS's stance and recommended "[the paintings] remain and become the vehicle for understanding the Dakota War and other related subjects, accompanied by guides to them, including bibliographical references for further study and reading, so these chapters of Minnesota history are addressed."

Darla Gebhard, a signer of this second letter, addressed some of the criticisms regarding the paintings' depiction of the Dakota people. In the Gag painting, the Indians appear as shirtless aggressors with muskets in their hands.

Gebhard confirmed that while painting "The First Battle of New Ulm" in the late 1880s, Anton Gag conducted detailed research in St. Paul and interviewed several surviving defenders. He also traveled to the

reservation near Morton to interact with the Dakota people. Gebhard said some of the imagery Gag painted could be disturbing, but it is fairly accurate as to what occurred in New Ulm during the August 1862 battle.

Gebhard and other local historians have also expressed concern that despite repeated requests, the Capitol Art Subcommittee has declined to hold public meetings in the Brown, Redwood and Renville county areas where many of the descendants from both sides of the Dakota War still live.

Gebhard said that it is disturbing the subcommittee would make decisions on art displays without seeking input from people whose ancestors were directly impacted by the events depicted in the art.

The next meeting of the Minnesota State Capitol Art Subcommittee is scheduled for Monday, Jan. 4. Time and location have yet to be announced. Comments, public input, and survey responses submitted to committee will be taken under consideration for the subcommittee's preliminary report in January 2016.