



Workers prepare from the Governor's Reception Room for storage in a climate-controlled facility. Many pieces of art commissioned for the 1905 Capitol building depict scenes from the Civil War. Photo: Minnesota State Capitol Restoration Project

Capitol restoration: It depends what 'keep the art' means

By: Chris Steller January 13, 2016 0

The panel charged with making recommendations for the existing artwork — and perhaps new works of art — at the State Capitol building got a missing piece of public input Monday.

The Art Subcommittee of the Minnesota State Capitol Preservation Commission has gone to great lengths over the last year to gather opinions of Minnesotans about the art they see when they visit noted architect Cass Gilbert's monument in marble. (The 1905 building is in the midst of a multi-year \$310 million restoration project — of which artistic considerations are a small but meaningful and sometimes controversial part.)

Chiefly, that input was from a series of public meetings around the state, hosted by subcommittee co-chairs Rep. Diane Loeffler, DFL-Minneapolis, Sen. David Senjem, R-Rochester and former state Supreme Court Justice Paul H. Anderson.

In addition to those face-to-face events was an online survey soliciting citizen opinion that drew responses in the thousands.

At the panel's meeting on Jan. 4, they heard about most of the results from the public input meetings and Web survey from Mariah Levison, manager of the Minnesota Office for Collaboration and Dispute Resolution at the state Bureau of Mediation Services.

But one task was daunting enough that it took an extra week: summarizing the more than 3,000 responses to an online survey question about controversial art, particularly pieces that depict Native Americans.

The survey asked: "When architect Cass Gilbert designed the 1905 Minnesota State Capitol, he commissioned well-known artists to create

paintings that reflected the popular ideas, beliefs, and attitudes of the time. Some of those ideas may not represent the way many of us think today. What do you think should be done with the art that may not reflect our attitudes as Minnesotans today?"

More than a third of the comments contained a message that proved an enigma: the imperative to "keep the art."

That could have several meanings, Levison said. Some might have meant they want to keep the art where it has



Conservators assess the condition of a water-damaged mural in the Rotunda. Photo: JE Dunn Construction

been — for instance, a mural hanging in the Governor’s Reception Room or a governor’s portrait gracing a hallway.

Others might have meant they want to keep the art in the Capitol but would be open to moving it to another location within the building. The restoration project is opening up areas of the building that have been out of use but could now house some of the 148 works of art.

Still others may have intended “keep the art” to mean they don’t want state government to throw any works of art away. Disposing of art has never been one of the options under consideration, but rumors about that that spread on social media anyway may have inspired some of the “keep the art” responses.

Fewer but still substantial numbers of commenters expressed opinions that were more clear-cut. The second most common response, after “keep the art,” was that such controversial art should be removed from the Capitol building. Not making any changes was a third-ranking opinion, followed by using interpretation, balancing old with new, and moving works of art within the Capitol.

Exactly what to call the more controversial artworks in the subcommittee’s January report to the full Minnesota State Capitol Preservation Commission? “Art open to question or in need of interpretation” and “art the engenders discussion” were two alternatives proposed.

Loeffler said she wanted to be sure to honor the strength of feeling she saw in the responses at public input meetings and online.

“They showed up because they had strong feelings,” she said. “We have to convey that. We can’t act like it was a minor little concern. ... I don’t think we have to run away from saying it is controversial. There is real tension in these choices.”

Subcommittee member Anton Treuer, a professor at Bemidji State University, participated in Monday’s meeting only via a choppy phone connection, but other members present at the St. Paul meeting several times made reference to a message he had sent them by email. Treuer provided the message to Capitol Report. Here are excerpts:

“We need to move offensive art from the Minnesota State Capitol to a venue that will let us contextualize, learn from, and appreciate them. The reason this decision has been so difficult is because it is really a contest between two positive public ‘goods’—healthy inclusive politics on the one hand and unfettered timeless freedom for artistic representation in the Capitol on the other. ...

“Moving art is not censorship, which is defined as the ‘suppression or prohibition of art, film, or writing.’ Nobody is arguing that art should be destroyed, prohibited, or suppressed from the public sphere, just exhibited in a different venue. ...

“This what many of our citizens want, as they have said in public hearings on the matter, petitions signed by hundreds of citizens, and letters from constituent groups and elected tribal leaders. This is not political correctness, it’s just right.”

The petition Treuer mentioned is from Healing Minnesota Stories, an advocacy group organized around the Capitol art issue. Early this month, they submitted the names of more than 500 supporters who want to remove “offensive, traumatizing paintings” from the Capitol and provide new art reflecting the state’s current ethnic and cultural diversity, as well as improved interpretation for remaining art.

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