

Missouri History through the Art of Our State Capitol

Written by Bob Priddy

History through art

We learn the lessons

of our history in

many different ways.

Storytellers provide the

spoken word. Books and

magazines tell us with the

written word. Movies and

television often dramatize

historic events or show us

pictures and film of them

as they occurred. We also

learn of history as told

by the paintbrush and the

sculptor's hammer and

chisel.

A special commission was appointed in 1917 as the new Missouri State Capitol construction was ending to properly decorate the building.

The tax approved to pay off the bonds issued to pay for construction of the Capitol raised \$1 million more than expected. The money could only be used for the building's decoration, giving the commission financial resources no other state capitol decoration effort has had.

The five commissioners decided to use art to tell the stories of Missouri. They worked for more than a decade hiring some of America's foremost painters, sculptors, stained-glass designers, and tapestry makers to create images portraying the people and the events that have made Missouri what it is and have in the process shaped the kind of people we are.

Paintings teach us about the earliest people to live in Missouri. They show us the Pony Express; the beginnings of lead mining, our first industry; the coming of the great steamboats, the terrible tragedy of the Civil War, our natural resources and other events and places that have

shaped Missouri and its people.

Great sculptors remind us of Thomas Jefferson and the Louisiana Purchase, of Lewis and Clark and their epic journey to the Pacific Ocean, and of the importance of our two great rivers, the Missouri and the Mississippi.

The Capitol's third floor is the home of the Hall of Famous Missourians, a place where visitors often are surprised by the bronze busts of Missouri scientists, explorers, adventurers, authors, entertainers, statesmen, journalists, and artists.

Great stained glass windows symbolize historic events, industries and the qualities that make Missouri great.

Memorials on the north, or river side, of the Capitol building honor Missourians who have defended our nation in war and police officers who have died defending our safety. Two large carved marble fountains emphasize the role of sciences and the arts in contributing to our past as well as building for our future.

A different kind of art is part of the design of the building itself. The House and the Senate Chambers were created with an awareness of the art of acoustics, the management of sound. The whispering gallery, the area surrounded by a railing high up in the rotunda, is another example of the art of acoustics. Someone on one side of the gallery can face the wall and whisper. A person standing on the other side of



The Missouri State Capitol covers 3 acres in downtown Jefferson City. The dome, rising 238 feet and topped by a bronze statue of Ceres, the goddess of vegetation, is the first view of Jefferson City from the north. In addition to housing the House and Senate, the building provides offices for the governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, treasurer, state auditor and administrative agencies. The Missouri State Museum is located on the first floor of the Capitol and contains both long-term and temporary exhibits. Photo by Lloyd Grotjan. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

the gallery can put an ear to the wall and hear every word distinctly.

In a building where laws are passed that shape our future, art teaches us our history in canvas, bronze, stone, glass and fabric.

Learn more in this series about:

Native Americans

Mining

Steamboats

Civil War

Railroads

Capitols



Bob Priddy is a veteran Missouri Capitol reporter and co-author of "The Art of the Missouri Capitol: History in Canvas, Bronze and Stone."

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ACTIVITIES

1 The art in our state Capitol illustrates events in Missouri's history. History is documented every day in the newspaper. Look through your newspaper to find stories, editorials or ads that could be illustrated. Create art to tell the story. Explain how your illustrations enhance or replace the writing.

2 Create a mock newspaper to represent a historical period mentioned in the upcoming series features. Your newspaper must include news stories, advertisements, photographs, editorials, and other features found in your newspaper. Remember to study your newspaper for style and layout.

3 Have you heard the expression "A picture is worth a thousand words"? Look through the newspaper to find a picture that catches your eye. Without reading the cutline, study the picture. What "words" does this picture have to say? Write a paragraph explaining who, what, where, when, how. What happened right before this picture was taken? What happened immediately afterward? Swap with a partner. How do your interpretations compare?

Common Core Standards: R.CCR.2, R.CCR.4, W.CCR.2, W.CCR.3, W.CCR.4, SL.CCR.6, L.CCR.1

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