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Somsen Hall Mural Context: The Founding of Winona and the Somsen Hall WPA Mural

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Winona State University is situated on Mni Sota Makoce, the ancestral lands of the Dakota Oyate. We acknowledge and honor the Dakota Nations and the sacred land of all Indigenous peoples, and we strive to give that acknowledgement meaning by working with Indigenous people and nations whenever possible.

The Somsen Hall mural, painted in 1938 by John Martin Socha, was covered by a cloth covering, in 2020. It is not viewable by the public in Somsen Hall. The mural imagery is historically inaccurate and deeply hurtful to Indigenous peoples. Conversations led by Dr. Cindy Killion, faculty emerita, visiting scholars with relevant expertise, student groups, faculty and staff committees, and the Oceti Šakowiŋ led to the decision to cover the mural. The mural will be preserved, while hidden from view, for continued discussion and learning opportunities surrounding equity and bias as the WSU community and partnering communities determine further steps to take in addressing the mural's content.

Images of the mural are accessible to view by choice via OpenRiver, Winona State University-Krueger Library's Digital Repository (2020).

In 2017, two analyses of the mural's content were commissioned. The two documents were written by Iyekiyapiwin Darlene St. Clair, Associate Professor, Saint Cloud State University and Jill Ahlberg-Yohe, Associate Curator of Native American Art, Minneapolis Institute of Art, respectively.

The Founding of Winona

Winona is named for either the sister or cousin of Wabasha (Wapahaša), one of the Dakota leaders with this name who had a village at Wabasha's Prairie, the future site of the city of Winona. The name Winuna refers to the first-born in a Dakota family who is a girl.

The city of Winona was founded in 1851, just months after the two 1851 treaties were signed. Orrin Smith, credited with founding the city of Winona, was a steam boat captain who was familiar with the region.

The story of Winuna was told by different Dakota people to several early visitors including Zebulon Pike (1805), Stephen Long (1817), William Keating (1823), William Joseph Snelling (1830) and Mary Eastman (1849). The story tells of a young Dakota woman who is matched with a man she does not accept. Her response was to throw herself off what would be named "Maiden Rock" at Lake Pepin. This narrative is reflected in the Socha mural.¹

While this story was shared by Dakota people, newcomers to Mni Sóta Makoce were attracted to the tragedy of this story. In reflecting on hearing this story, Zebulon Pike stated that Winona's suicide "ended her troubles" and he praised her actions as "a wonderful display of sentiment in a savage!"²

The 1851 Treaties

*They knew—or thought they knew—what was best for the Indians, and the end justified the means. By a remarkable coincidence, what was deemed best for the Indians was invariably also to the advantage of the government, the traders, and, above all, the land-hungry settlers.*³

The treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota were negotiated in the summer of 1851. Negotiations began with the Sisiṭuṇwaṅ and Waḥpetuṇwaṅ bands. Having less experience in treating with the U.S., these bands were engaged first. After signing the original treaty, each signer was ushered to another document for a signature. This document, now referred to as the “Trader’s Papers,” stipulated that the traders would be first compensated for debts they claimed. These claims consumed the majority of the money set aside for the Dakota -- funds the Dakota would need to live on for the following year.

On July 29, negotiations began with the other two bands, the Bdewakaṇṭuṇwaṅ (or Mdewakaṇṭuṇwaṅ) and the Waḥpekute. These bands had more experience in treaty-making with the United States. Leaders of these bands had many grievances from previous agreements that hadn’t been addressed or resolved. However, because the other bands had already signed treaties, it gave the Bdewakaṇṭuṇwaṅ and Waḥpekute few options.

These two treaties encompassed much of the southern half of Minnesota and placed Dakota people on reservations. The dishonest actions of the United States in these treaties provides important context for what would come in 1862.

Citation 1--*Minnesota Place Names*, Warren Upham, 2001, pp 631

Citation 2--The Winona Legend, *Minnesota History*, G. Hubert Smith, December 1932, p 367

Citation 3--*The History of the Santee Sioux*, Roy Meyer, 1993, pp. 78

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The Somsen Hall WPA Mural

A Dakota Perspective

Muralists paint stories of place, history, identity, and belonging. They create murals to mythologize a story in time and place, guided by particular viewpoints. During the Great Depression, hundreds of murals appeared on walls across the country, sponsored by various New Deal programs, including the Works and Progress Administration, developed to put unemployed Americans back to work. These paintings were made to illustrate the history of “progress,” “civilization,” and work within the history of the United States. While the federal arts programs sought to represent a range of experiences, artists like this muralist, John Martin Socha, portrayed Indigenous people through the lens of mainstream ideology at the time. These romanticized and inaccurate depictions of Indigenous people as “Noble Savages” are now recognized as demeaning in the 21st century. Portrayals of indigenous people and of U.S. history, however, become opportunities to revisit and reframe the past, and offer places for important, candid conversations about Indigenous struggles and achievements of yesterday and today.

Minnesota artist John Martin Socha was commissioned to create a mural depicting the birth and development of the town of Winona. Socha was a student of perhaps the most famous muralist, Mexican artist Diego Rivera. Socha completed this mural in 1938. In addition to his work in Winona, his murals can be seen today in the Kiehle Auditorium at the University of Minnesota at Crookston and New Ulm High School.

The mural is read right to left and is meant to depict Winona over the course of time chronologically, a place of progress and development from a particular perspective.

Because of this, the painting begins with a scene of white male settlers in the 19th century, building a homestead from the abundant trees and mill industries of the area. The insertion of white settlers at the beginning of the mural creates an incorrect narrative of history, and stakes rights and claims to a territory already thriving with activity and settled by Indigenous people for millennia. The first appearance of Indigenous people happens next, and Socha fashions these portrayals romantically. Rather than revealing Indigenous people as living in highly sophisticated, complex cultures with vast trade networks and social systems, he presents them primitively, as mere inhabitants of the land and “closer to nature.” The mural creates a palpable sense that history is inescapable, where Indigenous people will inevitably disappear and will surrender to Christian “salvation” and their forced removal.

The large portrait of an Indigenous man, with sharply sculpted features and haunting eyes void of pupils is looking to the right, a signal to the white viewer that Indigenous cultures have long vanished from the land. Winona, a narrative of a tragic Dakota woman betrayed by love, is portrayed naked from the waist up, plunging to her death. The center panel above the doors depicts an Indigenous woman holding a blanket for a white trapper and an Indigenous man in deep discussion.

The left side of the mural depicts white women fully clothed, making bread in a dark room, working hard in the domestic sphere, yet isolated from public activities associated the “advancement” of the white settlement. In contrast, in the center of the left wall rests a large portrait of Orrin Smith, the European American steamboat captain credited with founding the city of Winona. Unlike the Indigenous man directly across the mural, portrayed as looking backward to the past, Smith looks directly forward with steely determined eyes, steering his ship and his city forward to the future.

Notice the color palettes of the two main panels. On the right panel with depictions of Indigenous people, the mural is painted in muted browns and earthy tones, colors often associated with nature and simplicity. In contrast, the left panel of white settlers and workers is painted in a cold blue, a sign of industrial development and dominant ideas of progress.

The panel ends with two white male workers, complex figures that show industriousness and determination, but they are also figures who are subjects of industrialization.

In 1851, Dakota people signed the treaty of Traverse de Sioux by which the United States government seized more than half of what is now Minnesota, a treaty that was filled with inaccuracies and illegalities with devastating consequences for the Dakota. (See side panel). In November 1851, before the two 1851 treaties were ratified by the U.S. Senate, Orrin Smith, a European American steamboat captain familiar with this stretch of the Mississippi River, established a claim to land in the place that would soon become the city of Winona.

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