

Recommendations of the Columbus Murals Committee

July 25, 2019

Recommendation 1: Create an exhibition about the early history of the University, to include the story of the Columbus murals.

The University does not currently have an exhibition anywhere on campus that tells the story of the University's founding and early years. We recommend that the University allocate the necessary resources to create such an exhibition and assemble a group to work on this as soon as possible.

In reflecting on the creation of such an exhibition, the Committee identified several contexts that we believe ought to inform the telling of the University's larger story, which would, of course, include an interpretation of the murals. These contexts are:

- The history of the Congregation of Holy Cross, the University's founding order;
- The local context of the history of the relationship between indigenous peoples and Europeans, to include especially the perspectives of what one committee member described as the "still living, growing and thriving community" of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi as well as other indigenous peoples of the area;
- The broader history of the Americas, which must encompass the history of indigenous peoples and the "encounter" between the Old World and the New that Columbus' arrival represents in all its complexity, including both positive effects, such as the evangelization of the Americas, and negative consequences, including disease, genocide, and the introduction of slavery, that issued from that event;
- The history of Catholics in America and the important part that Notre Dame has played and continues to play in that history;
- The history of Columbus as a symbol of European, Catholic and United States cultures, including the context of 1882, which saw the founding of Knights of Columbus and the commissioning of the Main Building murals amid deep anti-Catholic sentiment, especially in the Midwest; and
- The University's history of welcoming artists and commissioning works of art, e.g. Luigi Gregori and Ivan Mestrovic.

To accomplish the critically important and painstaking work of planning a first-rate exhibition to explore these complex, interconnected themes, we recommend the creation of an Exhibition Committee for this specific purpose, comprised of individuals with the requisite skills and expertise. Their work should be directed toward opening the exhibition in 2022, when Admissions vacates the spaces on the second floor of the Main Building.

Given its centrality and proximity to the murals---and the happy circumstance of that space becoming available when Admissions moves to the new McKenna Hall--- we see the second floor of the Main Building as the ideal location for such an exhibition. We understand the edifice of the Main Building itself to be a testimony to the contributions of immigrant Catholics to the United States. We also recognize, of course, that the murals were commissioned in support of this narrative. In telling the stories of Notre Dame's founding and early history, we have the opportunity to revisit them and to consider--- among other contexts --- the place of Catholics in the U.S. then and now, with the benefit of contemporary knowledge and insights about the presence and role of indigenous peoples in our shared history. It seems to us that an ideal place to consider and reflect on these themes is in the very building where those who came before us also expressed their notions of community, belonging, and identity.

We acknowledge that planning the exhibition will be complex on several levels. First, we do not see the exhibition as being only “all about the murals” but rather as something much larger. Our deliberations began as a consideration of how to display and tell the story of the murals, and we certainly support telling that important story. However, we believe it is important to find the right balance in terms of the prominence and proportion of the exhibit given to telling the story of the murals relative to telling the larger history of the University. The exhibition should not be “about” Columbus but is instead primarily about the University and the Church in the United States in the 19th century.

In our view, it will be a necessary and essential part of the exhibition to explain why the Columbus murals were commissioned, and also why they are now covered on most days. This can, in our view, best be done by incorporating the story of the murals into the larger historical framework of the University’s founding and early years.

Second, we are very intentional in recommending that the focus of the exhibition be on the University’s early years. While the University may choose at some point to create a museum that would span its entire history, the current plan for an exhibition requires a narrowing of focus and purpose. The committee believes it is the story of the University’s founding---within the framework of the contexts outlined above---that needs most urgently to be told.

We recognize that there may be a certain temptation to use the exhibition as a way to “glamorize” the University’s early history. We urge the Exhibition Committee to resist this temptation, and to approach its task from a scholarly perspective, so that the exhibition it creates will reflect the spirit of inquiry and commitment to truth so foundational to this community. In our own discussions about the exhibition, we have returned on numerous occasions to an observation offered by one of our committee members:

“One of our jobs is to muddy the waters. We need to acknowledge the tangled history, and the many different threads. Some things that we now regard as evil were once regarded as good. Both are part of the history of Notre Dame, and we need to acknowledge our past...As people walk into the Main Building, the living room of the University, they are walking into a complex and very American place.... As we situate the history of the University into the broader arc of European history as well as 19th century U.S. history---which must include the history of indigenous peoples--- it is critical that our voice be that of a Catholic research university--- a distinctive view, rooted in Christianity and a belief in the dignity of all humans.”

Among the questions we were asked to consider was whether a temporary display of the Columbus murals should be installed while the much more comprehensive exhibition described above is being developed---especially since it is our understanding that the work of the Exhibition Committee is likely to take as long as three years.

With this as context, we focused on two possibilities for a temporary exhibition, namely: a) the installation of an electronic kiosk which would feature the images and some basic information about the murals; and b) the potential use of a small conference room on the second floor of the Main Building (or elsewhere in the Main Building) where smaller versions of the murals could be hung, alongside text from the University’s current brochure about the murals.

After careful consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of the various options, it is the recommendation of this Committee that we forgo a temporary display, as such a display could not adequately reflect the complexity and nuance so critical to an appropriate consideration of the murals and the larger histories connected to them.

Instead, we suggest that: a) the installation of the coverings (described below in Recommendation 2) be delayed, at least through the 2019-20 academic year and perhaps longer; and that b) the timing of the installation of the coverings coincide with the public release by the Exhibition Committee of a more complete description of the exhibition to be created on the second floor of the Main Building, to include renderings and a definitive timeframe for installation.

Recommendation 2: Install removable coverings over the Columbus murals featuring the flora and fauna of this region as well as plants and birds used in Christian iconography, and fusing the European aesthetic with that of indigenous peoples.

The Committee wishes to express its gratitude to two of its members, Doug Marsh and Julie Boynton, who developed a proposal for the mural coverings that we enthusiastically endorse. The fabrication of the proposed coverings is lightweight and breathable, and thus will not damage the murals themselves. Also, these coverings can be secured to prevent tampering but are easily removed with the proper tools, allowing for the murals' display as appropriate.

In terms of the actual design of the coverings, we recommend the creation of a small working group (ideally to include some members of our Committee who have generously expressed interest in continued service and someone from the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi) to further develop the designs in partnership with Doug and Julie's teams and Conrad Schmitt, consistent with the vision for the coverings we endorse—namely, a) that the designs would feature the flora and fauna of this area, drawing especially from the University's own Museum of Biodiversity established and cultivated by Frs. Sorin, Nieuwland and Zahm; b) that the designs would also include images from the natural world used in Christian (including Marian) iconography; and c) that special attention would be given to fusing the European aesthetic with the aesthetic of indigenous peoples.

Recommendation 3: Once the coverings are installed, allow faculty who utilize the murals in their teaching or research to continue to access them, as well as other members of the community with appropriate purposes, according to protocols to be established by the President's Office.

With the announcement of the appointment of this Committee, we were contacted by faculty colleagues across various disciplines who regularly utilize the murals in their teaching or research, a greater number, in fact, than we had previously realized. We recommend that the President's Office create protocols around the uncovering of the murals to allow those faculty who utilize the murals in their work as scholars and teachers to continue to access them—understanding, of course, the necessity for putting into place reasonable rules around requirements of advance notice, frequency of display, etc.

Recommendation 4: Institute a University-wide annual observance of Founder's Day. As part of this commemoration, display and invite dialogue about the Columbus murals in connection with a symposium that explores one or more aspects of Notre Dame's early history.

Part of this Committee's charge was to consider when and how it might be most appropriate to uncover the murals and offer the campus the opportunity to view them. In the course of our discussions, we came to see our consideration of this question as an opportunity to think more broadly about how to engage as a scholarly community with the University's complex history and in the process, reaffirm our deepest shared values.

Thus, we recommend the commemoration of Founder's Day each year---initially perhaps with a single day of events, but eventually building to a week-long observance---by hosting, among other events, a scholarly symposium or teach-in that explores an aspect of Notre Dame's founding and early history.

Certainly, any of the contexts we identified in Recommendation 1 as central to the creation of the University's early history exhibit would be appropriate as an organizing theme of a Founder's Day symposium. The themes of the Founders' Day events, going forward, need not be limited to themes explicitly or obviously related to the murals themselves.

In the days leading up to Founder's Day and the symposium, we recommend the murals remain uncovered, to allow the campus to engage with these complex images.

In planning the University's Founder's Day commemoration---to include a symposium as well as a Mass and other events as appropriate---we recommend that the President's Office collaborate closely with the colleges and with the various institutes and centers, as well as with the Congregation of Holy Cross and Campus Ministry.

We further recommend that a critical component of the University's Founder's Day commemoration should be the participation of native peoples, as speakers or co-sponsors of the symposium/teach-in, or perhaps by co-hosting a separate event, such as a Powwow, that would become part of the campus commemoration.

The fact that Founder's Day is on the feast day of St. Edward the Confessor (October 13), thus occurring close to but not coinciding with Columbus Day, makes this an especially appropriate date to target, though the timing of Fall Break may in some years require a flexible approach to scheduling.

Finally, should the murals remain uncovered for the 2019-20 academic year and potentially into the 2020-2021 academic year as we have recommended, we nonetheless would urge the University to move forward with the observance of Founder's Day along the lines we have proposed for Fall 2020. We believe that doing so is important to reframe the debate around the murals and to demonstrate in a very tangible way that our collective efforts are aimed not at "covering up" the past as some have suggested, but rather at illuminating and understanding history. The Founder's Day symposium should, indeed, affirm the University's commitment, in the context of a shared Catholic mission, to respectful and civil dialogue, even on---and perhaps especially on---controversial questions. It should be emphasized in the context of the Founder's Day events that the decision to cover the murals on most days was not intended to silence or censor debate, discussion, dialogue, and argument but rather to foster them.

Recommendation 5: Recognize in a concrete and tangible way the Native American communities that were so integral to the University's founding.

In addition to the other measures we have recommended above that would require deep and meaningful engagement with the native peoples in this area, we further recommend that the University recognize in a concrete and tangible way the Native American communities that were so integral to its founding. We see such initiatives as an important way to both create a more permanent tribute to their invaluable contributions and reaffirm the principles upon which the University was founded.

Among the ideas the Committee discussed in a very preliminary way were: 1) the commissioning of a monumental sculpture or other prominent artwork on campus celebrating the presence and role of indigenous peoples in the founding of the University, or multiple smaller commissions to Native American painters and sculptors; 2) the siting of a "Land Acknowledgement" in a prominent place on campus or on the University website recalling that Notre Dame is located on the traditional and ancestral lands of the Potawatomi and Miami peoples; 3) the establishment of additional scholarships for Native American students and/or the establishment of educational or research programs, fellowships, grants or other initiatives in Native American studies; for example, the annual appointment of an "Elder in

Residence” in support of the Native American community. Some committee members favored option 3, particularly given the potential complexities of commissioning new artwork in the context of the murals controversy and the great range of subjective responses to works of art.