

A Word with **Bob Priddy**

Co-author, *The Art of the Missouri Capitol: History in Canvas, Bronze, and Stone*

After fire destroyed Missouri's capitol in 1911, voters approved a bond issue to construct a new statehouse. The tax to pay the bonds produced a one-million-dollar surplus, leaving a vast amount of money to decorate the new building.

In the book, *The Art of the Missouri Capitol: History in Canvas, Bronze, and Stone* Bob Priddy and Jeffery Ball explore the many stories behind the art: the rigors of its creation, the political roadblocks that endangered the decoration program, and the triumph of the commissioners who devoted more than ten years to the project. This book is now available for purchase through [University of Missouri Press](#), online booksellers, and your local bookseller (including Left Bank Books and local Barnes and Nobles).

Author, Bob Priddy was able to take time to talk about the book; here's what he had to say:

What do you hope to achieve by publishing this book?

We have several goals. The Missouri Capitol is unique among state capitols not only in the quantity of its decorations but in the quality of them. The special commission appointed to oversee the first generation of decorations from 1917-1928 hired some of the nation's finest painters, sculptors, tapestry weavers, and stained glass artists. They were people whose names are still honored today in their fields. We want people who read this book to understand the importance of the people who provided the decorations that make our building unique. We want people to know who they were and the significance of the places or events or elements of our society they portray.

There are many layers to the stories of the artwork in the building. There's the story about who the artist was. There's the story of how he created the art (because almost every record of the Capitol Decoration Commission has been lost we've had to piece this story together from numerous sources and have a fairly complete account for only a few of the artists). There's the story of the historical event being portrayed. In some cases there's a story of political reactions to the works. In some cases there's an analysis of the elements of the work---the issue of changing perspective in two paintings in particular---and in some cases, the story of what these commissions meant to the careers of the artists. N.C. Wyeth, for instance, felt his two Civil War murals would be a turning point in his career in which he had been known as an illustrator. He felt these works would establish him as a legitimate painter. And they did. After his Missouri works, his career output shifted away from illustration and more toward painting.

How long did this project take from conception to finished project?

That's kind of hard to answer. Practically, it has been ten years since the day in 2001 that Tom Sater, who was overseeing the restoration of the senate chamber, suggested Jeff and I get together and write a book about the construction and decoration of the Capitol. I had written an article for *Missouri Life* magazine several years earlier about the construction of the building. Jeff, as a graduate student at the University of Missouri, had been researching the story of the murals and how they fit into the history of mural painting for several years. We had exchanged notes several years earlier for an exhibit for the state Museum that Jeff put together of the preliminary versions of the murals---before the artists were allowed to place their paintings at the Capitol, they had to present full-color preliminary versions of their works to

the commission which had to approve the final designs. We both felt somebody needed to do a book about the art of the Capitol. Some day. I suggested to Tom that we would need some way to raise money to pay for our expenses. We figured we'd have to do some traveling for research. A few days later Tom and I got together in Sen. John Schneider's office with the co-chairmen of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Wayne Good and John T. Russell, to talk about that issue. Senator Goode introduced a bill to create what was then called the Second Capitol Commission (the first one was the group that supervised construction of the building). It was the last bill passed by the Senate in the 2001 session. The commission has since become just the Capitol Commission and has taken on additional responsibilities. But it did raise money to subsidize publication of the book so we could keep it priced a nickel below \$50.

I suppose you could say the project began in 1975 when Thomas Hart Benton died. I knew the mayor of Jefferson City from my days in local radio and I had heard him tell some Benton stories. His name was John G. Christy and he was the Speaker of the House when Benton painted his mural 75 years ago this year. So when Benton died I had Christy tell me about how he was appalled at what Benton had done to the House Lounge. Christy was one of those who tried to get the mural painted over. That interview became a starting point for a series of lectures I did about Benton several years later and was the first piece of information that led to my book about the Benton mural that came out in 1989, the centennial of Benton's birth, *Only the Rivers are Peaceful: The Missouri Mural of Thomas Hart Benton*. I was curious about why so many artists from Taos, NM were represented at the Capitol and in 1982, when my wife and I were visiting her sister in law in Albuquerque, I went up to Taos and interviewed two of the daughters of those artists. I later corresponded with the son of a third one. So I'd been accumulating stuff for a long time before 2001. Jeff had, too, although it was of different forms as he studied at the University of Missouri. So the roots for this project go back more than 35 years although the project itself dates to 2001.

What were some of the most interesting things you learned while putting this book together?

Oh, gosh. There are so many great stories behind the stories in this book. That's a hard question to answer. As I said, all of the records of the Capitol Decorations Commission—meeting minutes, correspondence, most of the contracts with the artists, photographs, etc. ---have disappeared. So the process of discovery was regularly producing interesting things. Sometimes things just fell into our laps. One day I was working in the [Missourinet](#) office at the Capitol when one of the tour guides who knew I was working on the book came in with an elderly man from England. He was the son of Sir Frank Brangwyn's assistant when Brangwyn was painting the huge pendentives that are in the third floor rotunda. And he had just published a book of his father's journal entries for the time his father worked with Brangwyn on those paintings. Out of the clear blue, we had primary source material we did not know existed just because this fellow came to the capitol to see the paintings and brought some of his books with him. Jeff, during his research, had been to the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C., and had found the personal papers of Allen True, the Denver Artist who did 16 paintings for the small domes on the third floor, thus giving us important original source material for those decorations. But there was more. True had been a student of Brangwyn before World War I and returned to London after the war to help Brangwyn with the paintings for the lower rotunda. The letters he wrote home to his parents in Denver about the time he was in London gave us a first-hand account of the painting of that series of murals. So we were able to piece together a pretty complete story of Brangwyn's works even though we had nothing from the Decoration Commission files.

The Archives of American Art was an important resource for us. Toward the end of our research I was given access to the personal papers of Charles Hoffbauer, who painted the *Glory of Missouri at War*

mural in the House. Those files produced some valuable information about Hoffbauer, who was a soldier in the trenches for the French army before being assigned to the American Army Camouflage Corps—which was commanded by Evarts Tracy, one of the architects who designed the Capitol. One of the other members of that corps was Sherry Fry (a guy) who sculpted the figure of Ceres, which is on the top of the dome. That's an example of how one source develops several threads that we used to weave our narrative together.

That's why it's hard to pin down a couple of the most interesting things---because the entire process of discovery was interesting and kept leading us to new and exciting discoveries.

What is your favorite piece of art in the capitol and why?

The Capital City Council on the Arts asked me last November to make a list of my ten favorite works as part of a fundraiser they had one night when they asked me to do a couple of hour-long lectures about the Benton Mural. I fudged because my ten was more like 61. The Brangwyn murals (13) and the Hall of Famous Missourians (38 busts) kind of skewed the list of ten favorites. I picked my favorites partly because of the artistic values and partly because of the history behind each work. If I had to boil it down, though, I'd probably find it hard to separate two: N.C. Wyeth's [*Battle of Wilson's Creek*](#) and Frank Nuderscher's [*Artery of Trade*](#). Both are extremely powerful, dramatic images.

Wyeth was a master of the use of light and shadow and his illustrative techniques are abundantly displayed in the Civil War battle scene. There is terrible violence here, terrible tragedy that was typical of the type of fighting of the Civil War which was often groups of men separated by short distances. A soldier could look the man he killed in the eye before he killed him. One man is dead and another has just been struck by a bullet. A tree in the foreground is scarred by bullets---something a Wilson's Creek veteran told Wyeth made the scene all the more real.

Nuderscher's studio overlooked the St. Louis riverfront and the Eads Bridge. One of the photographs in the book shows Nuderscher working on an easel painting that is similar to the large mural on the second floor of the capitol. He paints the Eads Bridge from the east, looking across the Mississippi into downtown St. Louis. His design captures the dynamism of the east not just crossing the Mississippi but driving its way into St. Louis, causing ripples that will spread to the west across Missouri and ultimately to the frontier beyond Kansas City.

The painting is also one of two that provide the most obvious optical illusions in the Capitol. In Nuderscher's painting, the bridge seems to move and change directions as a person walks past it. It all has to do with the vanishing points and proportionality of arches and stuff like that—that is explained in the book.

I'm quite fond of Ceres. Not the figure on top of the dome but of the plaster model of the statue that now resides in the Museum of Art and Archaeology at UMC. I think she is drop dead gorgeous, inviting, and mysterious. Fry had to make a plaster model of the statue for commission approval before the larger bronze version was installed.

I'm also fond of the *Signing of the Treaty* statue grouping on the north front of the building. It's a great piece of sculpture but I am intrigued more by the story of the greatest land fraud in American history that was the Louisiana purchase and what the figures tell us by their poses what they were feeling when The French and Americans came to terms.

What do you hope readers will take away from this book?

We hope that this book will encourage people to care more for our capitol. It's more than 90 years old now, older than the building that burned in 1911. Its specialness deserves care and respect. This great building has a lot of problems that need a lot of repair, renovation, and restoration work to be done. But too few people seem to notice or care. I hope that those who read this book develop enough pride or increase the pride they already have in our Capitol and want it treated better than it is being treated today. We have more than two dozen official state symbols but the capitol is our greatest symbol. I want people who read this book to better understand that greatness and in doing so understand that it deserves their care.