

"The land belongs to no man,

And as long as the sun shines

And the rains fall pure,

The earth will be there

for everyone."

– Quote from a Native American chief



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The Mason Murals



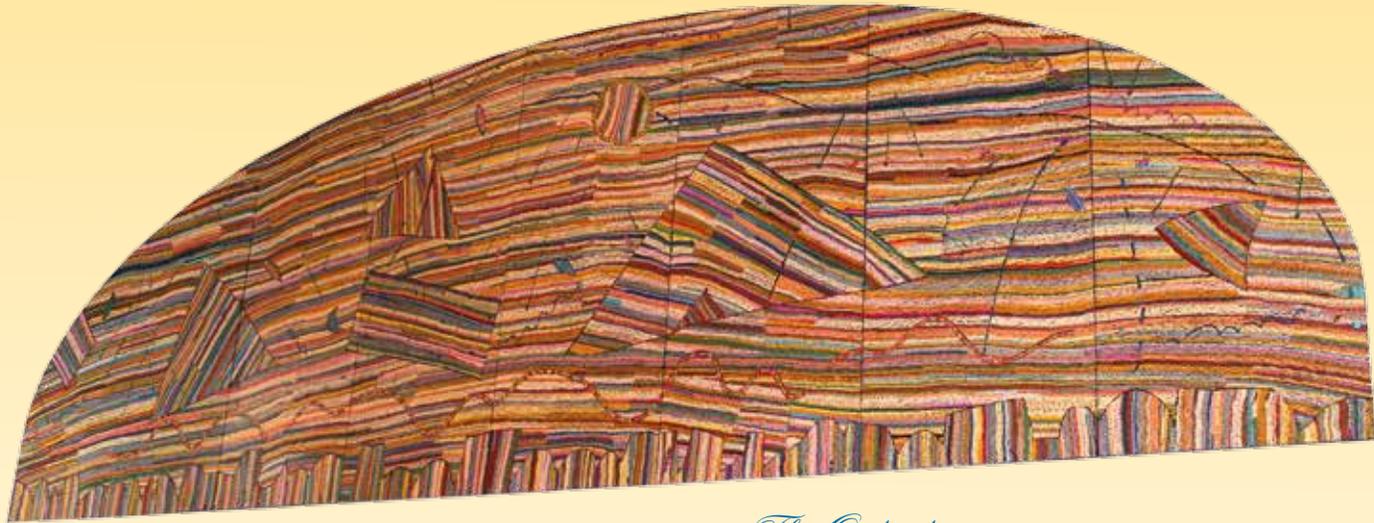
The Mason Murals

Creating the Murals

Washington's State Capitol, built over an eight-year period, was completed in 1929. The architectural firm of Wilder and White designed spaces for murals in the House and Senate chambers, the rotunda, and the lower lobby areas of the Capitol.

More than 50 years passed before murals were created to fill those architectural voids. The immense paintings that were installed in the Senate chambers were an abstract vision of the state of Washington as seen by University of Washington art professor Alden Mason. At the same time, Michael Spafford – also an art professor at the university – was commissioned by the Legislature to create murals for the House of Representatives.

Mason, a native of the Puget Sound region, created the murals using hundreds of different colors of brilliant acrylic paint applied to plywood panels in thick “squiggles” reminiscent of cake decoration. His joyful “squeeze bottle” technique had evolved over more than 40 years. Mason had become known for his vibrant watercolor landscapes, and he considered the unusual medium an extension of that form.



The Work

The two lunette halves of the mural represent Eastern and Western Washington. The artist used abstract symbols throughout to express his vision of the Northwest. Triangular shapes indicate the mountains, and the sun is represented as a circle. Parallel diagonal lines depict the rain, while horizontal layered bands symbolize the earth.

Mason used a wave motif to depict the water, while elliptical shapes throughout the murals represent the returning salmon, a suggestion of the fruitful nature of the Northwest.

Finally, Mason chose to place double lines enclosing a meandering series of dots representing a freeway to indicate the intrusion of human culture on the pure landscape. Mason claimed the murals were based on a quotation from an early Native American chief. Generally translated, it said,

“The land belongs to no man,
And as long as the sun shines
And the rains fall pure,
The earth will be there for everyone.”

When Mason explained his efforts, he said, “I wanted a sense of the enormity of the landscape, the seascape, and the skyscape, and yet I wanted a personal expression of my feeling about this region.”

The untitled work does not assign a meaning or value to any particular color, but relies on interrelated shapes and spaces to convey the artist's concept of the vast Northwest and the intimate connection among the natural elements.

The Outcasts

From the outset, the Mason murals were controversial. Not because of content or meaning, but simply because critics didn't feel they were appropriate for the solemn Senate chambers. In 1987, six years after the murals were installed, renovation of the Capitol interior began in preparation for the state's centennial celebration. The austere white ceilings were painted and gilded in the original 1920's design. Later that year the Senate passed a resolution to remove the murals, citing their incompatibility with the now ornate Senate chambers.

Mason's supporters mounted a cooperative legal effort to have the murals kept in the chambers, while state officials contended they had the right to remove the murals despite the artist's objections. Eventually the courts sided with the Senate, and the murals were removed.

The New Home

In 1987, shortly after the murals had been removed from the Capitol, Centralia College leaders suggested the Mason murals might be welcome at the college. That early seed of an idea sparked discussions for locating the murals in a new \$3.5 million college learning resource center, still on the drawing boards at that time.

With the support and encouragement of the Department of General Administration, a central clerestory gallery integral to the new center was slightly modified to accommodate the huge murals. Nearly four years later, they were installed.

The splendid murals of Alden Mason in the Henry P. Kirk Library have been joined in Centralia College's collection of major artwork by Michael Spafford's *The Twelve Labors of Hercules*, now hanging in Corbet Theatre in Washington Hall.

