

The Seattle Times

Friday, September 28, 1990 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

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Decision On Murals Taken From Senate Upsets Both Sides

By Deloris Tarzan Ament

A compromise decision handed down yesterday on murals pulled down three years ago from the state Senate chambers in Olympia left both sides in the legal dispute unsatisfied.

Judge Terrence Carroll of King County Superior Court allowed one of the pair of murals to remain temporarily in place at Centralia College, instructing that the search for a more suitable place continue.

"They are extraordinary pieces of artwork," Carroll said. "In this case, in many ways I feel less like a judge than a trustee. It is a position that defies all precedent."

Seattle artist Alden Mason painted the pair of 44-foot-long, brightly colored, site-specific murals for lunettes in the Senate chambers in 1981. When the Capitol building was renovated in 1987, senators voted to remove the murals, and they were placed in storage.

Murals painted at the same time by Seattle artist Michael Spafford for the House chambers also were threatened with removal, but at present are still in place, and Christine Yorozu, communications director for the state Department of General Administration, says "they're not going anywhere as far as we know."

Yorozu says that several years ago, when it appeared that Spafford's murals also might come down, Seattle architect David Leavengood, who was designing a new library for Centralia College, suggested that he could design walls of the library specifically to receive the murals.

When the Spafford murals stayed up, the plans were shifted to accommodate the two-part Mason mural. Mason challenged the right of the state to hang his site-specific mural in a location for which it never was intended. He said the library was too small to allow the mural to be seen from the distance for which it was designed, saying it would allow viewers to "see the paint instead of the painting."

"It would substantially damage the integrity of the artwork to place it there," attorney Gene Middaugh argued yesterday in court. "Ideally, the mural should go back in the Senate chambers, because it is site-specific. At minimum, it should go into a building of similar style."

Mary Ellen Combo, the lawyer for the state, pointed out that arches in the library were designed to replicate those for which the mural was painted. She said that in Centralia, the mural could be seen from the same distance it would have been viewed from midway back on the Senate floor.

Carroll earlier had instructed the state and attorneys for Mason each to name an adviser to accompany him to Centralia to look at one of the pair of murals placed temporarily in the library, to determine whether the relocation was aesthetically suitable.

Beth Sellars, curator at Spokane's Cheney Cowles Museum, was named by Mason's attorneys. Paul Carkeek, who for many years owned and operated the now-defunct Penryn Gallery in Seattle, was named by the state. They accompanied Carroll to Centralia last Saturday.

Carroll said, "The site clearly has problems in terms of the public and its ability to appreciate the murals."

Yesterday in King County Superior Court, Carroll allowed the mural temporarily installed to remain on view in Centralia, but instructed the state Department of General Administration to work with Mason to continue to search for another, more suitable location. Carroll set another hearing on the matter for March 22.

"If no better location has been found by then, I'll take another look at the college as a permanent place for the murals," Carroll said.

Greg Kucera, Mason's gallery representative who accompanied the artist to court, said, "It's clear to us that while the judge's hesitancy at having the pieces stored is valid, it gives Centralia College an unfair advantage as a site for the murals. We're opposed to having the pair of murals divided; it's like having a baby cut in half.

"We're distressed that because of legislative restrictions, he can't also rule that Alden's other half of the mural go up in the Senate chambers for the same time period."

Centralia College president Dr. Henry Kirk expressed equal regret about the decision. He said that the mural on view in Centralia "exceeded our expectations. You can see it better than you could in Olympia. It's so brilliant, so alive.

"We're sorely disappointed in the decision," he said, "but we understand there were many issues here for the judge to consider." Kirk lauded efforts by the Department of General Administration and 20th District legislators to get the murals back into public display.