Get a glimpse of the Capitol murals before they're taken away

By Regina Hackett

The state's most famous murals have spent most of their lives covered in more than a curtain. Michael Spalding's "Labors of Hercules" have been covered in 1982, shortly after installation, saying the murals were pornographic.

Although that silly charge isn't much in Olympia these days, it still has punch. Time magazine's piece on the controversy last week referred to "kinky sex." In recent years, the murals in Olympia have polished their manners and refined their argument. To hear them talk now, one would think they're nearly all "Labors of Hercules" fans. Spalding's great and so is everything he has done, as a guy. Nobody's disputing the artistic merit of his murals, certainly not.

The problem is they just aren't appropriate for the August setting of the House chambers.

Georgette Valle, D-King County, said Thursday she thought the murals were "tremendous art" but belonged somewhere else, maybe a jazz club.

House Speaker Joe King is showing off a more sophisticated version of Orwellian double talk in a letter to constituents, claiming that the Legislature "always" had the goal of honoring Michael Spalding for his "great achievements" and adding this capper: "I believe we will accomplish this by allowing the murals to be placed in a more suitable setting."

If this is the way the Legislature honors an artist, maybe his work to seven years of purdah and more, a court, light and now promised removal and relocation (the relocation over Spalding's objections). I'd have to see what that body would do if it decided to take an artist to task. (Firing squad? Chopped off hands?)

The idea that the murals and the chamber are the ultimate odd couple has become the authorized version of events. Like most authorized versions of events, it's not true.

These 10-foot high, 46-feet wide pair of facing, half-moon mural collages are, if anything, more appropriate now than in 1982, when the House was a grab and color that lent the murals a garish tinge, in spite of their carefully calibrated grays, blacks, creams and whites, rimmed with red, blue and gold.

Today, after being rehablitaed and repainted, the chamber is a plush prelude to its famous Hercules paintings, with the diagonals dividing the "Labors" making visual connection with the series of doors below, psychologically extending the boundaries of the room while linking the visitors' galleries to the main floor. The diagonals also "quote" from the pillars around the room, something that could make the murals look oddly blocked out in another setting.

Reporters like to interview visitors and ask them what they see in the murals, and if Spalding had painted Rorschach tests instead of partially abstracted versions of a well-known series of Greek myths, they see birds in flight, marathon dancing, ballet and mud wrestling, race riots, the map of Europe, the "Adventures of Rin Tin Tin" and the progress of a plague. This fascinating catalog of private fears and desires must mystify the artist, who took the trouble to title his work "Labors of Hercules" and divide them into 12 panels, loosely referring to Hercules' best-known struggles.

But the confusion is understandable, partially because abstraction is in its infancy in the West's mainstream culture. Unlike Africans, most Americans aren't skilled at looking at anything but the surface. For those with this handicap, looking at Spalding's images might be disturbing. Abstract enough to lose their literal, representational hold on reality, the radical simplification of form is part of what gives this old story a contemporary life.

The panels are emblems of actions, subtle, almost delicate meditations on power. The fluidity of the form, with its light and dark, figures and ground reversals, suggests how unstable a thing power is to possess.

Hercules moves from difficult to impossible tasks, doing them well or badly, just as bills proceed or are vanquished by the legislative process. The "Labors of Hercules" is as a story one of our oldest metaphors for political power, a Greek tale set in a Greco-Roman revival-style building.

Mythic figures can't be explained away, and moral judgments of their actions aren't the point. Spalding isn't urging the legislators to stay a lion or launch a pre-emptory and misbegotten strike against an Amazon queen.

Hercules is pure symbolism, and it's a purity that attracted Spalding in the first place. Myth for him is a means of opening a canvas into a force field, activating an old tale without illustrating it. In this effort he is powerfully successful. The murals aren't the best thing he has ever done, but they are among the finest pieces of public art in this region's history.

King says they will be covered again Sept. 29 and removed in October. Barring a miracle, they will come down. Relocation plans are yet unannounced.

Art Trust, Seattle Allied Arts, the Mendoza brothers (Fred and David), and countless other artists and admirers of Spalding, can be proud of the struggle to save Spalding's murals to the Senate chamber.

When the Legislature moves to the Senate, now in storage.

The right thing isn't likely to win, but it honored and spared Mason when they most needed it, and made the admirers squirm, dissemble and disgrace themselves.