ARTS POLITICALS / Bruce Barcott

A place for art

Centralia has a new site just for Alden Mason’s controversial murals. Now the courts must decide if it’s the right site.

Between 1928 and 1979, the state Legislature made 11 unsuccessful attempts to decorate the House and Senate chambers of the Capitol Building with the work of local artists. The architects’ original plan for the ornate rooms called for art to adorn the large curved spaces, called lunettes, high on each chamber’s wall. But for 50 years the state’s lawmakers could not decide what kind of art to put up.

They finally succeeded in 1979 when the House and Senate agreed to sock away $200,000 for artistic decoration. The Washington State Arts Commission selected a jury of local art experts—one art professor each from the University of Washington and Washington State University, one sculptor, one architect, and one prominent patron of the arts—to choose among the nearly 200 applicants for the historic and lucrative commissions. In July 1980, the jury chose Alden Mason and Michael Spafford, long-time UW faculty members and artists of international prominence. Mason, then 61 years old, would create two site-specific murals for the Senate chambers. Spafford, then 44, agreed to create four murals for the House.

Mason had made his reputation in abstract but by the late 1970s was painting more and more with squeeze bottles—plastic point-filled paint tubes more commonly used as ketchup dispensers in cheap diners. His murals, to be hung on the front and back walls of the chamber in the 44-foot-long lunettes, were colorful abstractions created with this dollop-of-paint method. Oval fish shapes swam above and below a choppy waterline; circles represented moons and suns, triangles represented mountains and foothills; a highway snaked through it all, representing man’s intrusion into the wilderness.

Mason’s inspiration, according to a bronze plaque that was supposed to hang near the painting but was lost by the state, was a quote from Chief Joseph: “The land belongs to no man, and as long as the sun shines and the rains fall pure, the earth will be here for everyone.”

Spafford’s murals, to be hung on all four walls of the House, were to depict the mythical twelve labors of Hercules. Spafford completed the first two panels in early 1981; each featured six stark black-and-white scenes of Hercules’ travels. The figures were semiabstract and crude, almost like woodcuts. But when the panels were revealed to the esteemed members of the art establishment, where Spafford imagined Hercules killing the Nemean lion or capturing the Cretan bull, politicians saw smut. One said it was pornographic, another called it abominable, while a third contributed this eyebrow-raising quote to the fray: “It’s the kind of art one sees on the walls of a topless disco.”

The legislators immediately set about to renegotiate the deal. Both Senate and House refused to re-appropriate the balance of the $200,000 set aside for the artwork. Instead of working against the original August 1982 deadline, the artists now had to complete their murals by July 30, 1981. Beyond that date, the state could not legally pay them for their work.

Mason was able to finish and hang his murals by the new deadline; Spafford, with two panels still to go, was not. Spafford’s first two panels were installed on the side walls of the House (they are still there), and then he was sent packing with a pro rata payment for his work (about $58,000).

The Mason murals have always had a few critics, but the attacks launched against his work were like lobbed beanbags compared with the rockets fired at Spafford’s. Some legislators even played one artist as much more suitable art for the dignified chamber. By 1982 the legislators had stopped Spafford’s funding, but still had to look at his murals—as did their constituents (the works hang directly behind the visitors’ galleries); every Scout troop and ladies’ auxiliary that toured the Capitol had to eyeball Spafford’s 14-foot-high “obscenities.” Most House members wanted to take them down altogether, but Spafford had constructed the murals in a complex jigsaw design and attached them to the wall with industrial-strength adhesive, a kind of super glue. Taking the murals down would destroy them—and cost the taxpayers $27,000.

Thus was born the black-curtain compromise. The House voted to leave the murals up but to shield them from sensitive eyes with an $11,000 system of black curtains. The Labors of Hercules remained hidden behind the curtains for the next seven years, with occasional unveilings during intermittent debates about their future.

Back to Alden Mason. As previously mentioned, Mason had his critics—John Cherberg, former lieutenant governor and president of the state Senate, once said that having to look at the murals was “cruel
Painter Alden Mason poses with his murals before they were removed from the Senate chamber.
ford's critics could banish his work on the
grounds of obscenity, the most that Ma-
sen's detractors could say was that his col-
dorful abstractions didn't blend with the
more subdued tone of the beaux arts-style
chamber—or that they just didn't get it.

That changed in 1987, when Seattle ar-
chitect Barnett Schorr gave the anti-Mason
legislators the voice of authority they need-
ed to officially challenge the Senate murals.
Schorr's renovation of the Capitol rotunda,
completed in January 1987, so thrilled
legislators that they asked him to do the
same for the House and Senate chambers
for the 1989 state centennial celebration.
But Schorr told House and Senate mem-
bers that the Mason and Spafford murals
did not fit with his plans for their cham-
bers. The murals tended to overpower their
respective spaces, he said.

Say no more. Using Schorr's word as
their authority, the Senate (after long hours
of debate) voted in April to toss Mason's
work out. (House members were still trying
to figure out a way to bring down the
cloaked Spafford murals without destroy-
ing them.) The anti-mural charge was led
by Senate majority leader Ted Bottiger, a
 democrat from Pierce County who defend-
ed his aesthetic credentials by boasting to
Seattle Post-Intelligencer art critic Regina
Hackett, "I've got art in my office from my
district with the price tags on it. All I ask is
that the frames blend in with the decor." 
Meanwhile, a bid for a third work of art,
this one a mosaic mural by Jacob Lawrence
that would hang in the Capitol rotunda,
was lost in the shuffle. After losing the Ma-
sen fight, the Washington State Arts Com-
mission wasn't about to set up Lawrence
for a similar sucker punch.

Mason's murals weren't immediately giv-
en the boot. A few weeks after the Senate
vote, Mason and Spafford, with support
from a coalition of art supporters known as
the Mural Defense Fund, filed suit in King
County District Court to keep the murals
in place. The case was heard in October
1987 before Judge Terrence Carroll. After
five days of testimony by the artists, legisla-
tors, art experts, and even the chief clerk of
the House, Carroll ruled that the murals
could be taken down. Mason's work could
be taken away immediately, Carroll said,
but Spafford's work must stay on the wall
until the state could prove that the murals
would not be damaged in the removal proc-
ess. In addition, the judge declared the
state's $58,000 pro rata bargain with Spaf-
ford illegal and ordered the state to fulfill
the artist's original $91,960 contract.

The ruling was a technical victory for
the state and a moral one for the artists. In
his oral decision, Carroll said that, though
the state may be legally correct, "that
doesn't end the inquiry."

"There are still in my mind disturbing
thoughts regarding the treatment of these
two artists," the judge said. "Anyone sit-
ing in this courtroom could not come away
without a strong feeling of respect for the
two artists. You can argue the aesthetics
of what they did all you want, but I am per-
suaded that the artwork represents in
many ways a part of them, who they are
and what they represent. It's more than
simply...a consequence of an imperfect
democracy. It's much more. The stakes are
much more than that. And I can only hope
in the future that the state is more orga-
nized, clearer, and, most of all, more sensi-
tive in its dealings with artists whom they
are requesting to perform work. It troubles
me as a judge and as a citizen to have
to listen to the history here regarding the
treatment of these two artists."

At 9am on December 8, 1987, state
workers began liberating Alden Mason's
murals from the Senate walls. Five hours
later they were done. The paintings were
boxed and hauled to a Department of Gen-
eral Administration warehouse in Tumwa-
ter, where they remain.

While the fight over the murals was
taking place in Olympia chambers
and Seattle courtrooms, David Leavengood,
a Seattle architect, was designing a new li-

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was in full swing. Letters of support from local politicians, school officials, and business boosters poured into Kirk’s office. David Roeve, executive director of the Twin Cities Chamber of Commerce, wrote of the great tourist attraction the murals could become. Ironically, two years previous to the college’s efforts to acquire his work, Mason himself had used the same argument in favor of keeping the murals in Olympia.

By the beginning of March, state Senator Neil Amonson, a Republican from Centralla, had introduced and passed legislation directing the state to relocate the murals to Centralia College. In his resolution, Amonson specifically said, “The Senate does not intend to defeat the publicly funded murals on the Senate chamber to the future.”

Amonson’s resolution passed on March 8, and before the month was out, Mason, Kucera, Kirk, and all the rest (save Michael Spafford—the House was still trying to find a way to safely remove the murals) were back in court. Judge Carroll had already ruled that the state could move the murals to an appropriate site. But the question in the current battle is, is the Centralia library appropriate? Advocates for Mason argue that, since the artists created the work especially for the Senate site, no other space would be appropriate. Leavengood, the architect, contends that site-specificity is not an issue and that his library meets all space, lighting, and other requirements. By now, it’s a full circle: an architect (Schorr) who didn’t want Mason’s work muckiing up his design had prompted the murals’ ouster from the Senate; now another architect (Leavengood) wanted and admired the murals, but Mason didn’t want Leavengood’s space muckiing up his art.

But appropriate space and lighting is not the only issue. Richard Andrews, director of the Henry Art Gallery, argues that “there is a time when these questions of appropriateness should give greater authority to one voice”—the artist’s. Andrews declared in a court statement last May that “during an artist’s life there is always one person who knows the work of art, its structure and essence, more completely than anyone, and that is the artist… One of the ironies of our society is that we pride the contributions of artists as independent and vital forces in our societies, but tend to turn their works into commodities, somehow thinking that once a work of art is bought, the artist is no more or less qualified than any citizen to determine the artwork’s fate.”

Meanwhile, Mason keeps painting.

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ARTS & LEISURE

TELEVISION / Bart Becker

How sweet the sound

Amazing Grace

RICK'S 195

September 12

Amazing grace/how sweet the sound/that saved a wretch like me/I once was lost/but now am found/now blind/but now I see.

MAZING GRACE” seems like one of those songs that has been around forever, perhaps evolving from a combination of English chant and hard, wooden, straight-backed pews. In fact, the song is relatively modern, composed in the mid-18th century by a reformed English slave-ship captain, John Newton. Newton, by account, was a religious fanatic. His biographers say even other sailors were cowed by his language and religious rigidity. Then, one day, in the midst of a ponderous ravaging storm, when worldly seamanship seemed futile, Newton, to his own astonishment, as well as that of his shipmates, burst out with, “God help us.” In modern parlance, he was reborn. He gave up the slave trade, became a clergyman and abolitionist, and wrote a number of hymns. One of these was “Amazing Grace.”

Newton’s song was sung throughout the American South in the 19th century, by both masters and slaves. It remained primarily a religious, church-service song for more than 200 years after the civil-rights era, when it was picked up by demonstrators and took on more gener-