

Remembering the Indigenous people

The Bethlehem Gadfly Columbus monument October 10, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts on the Columbus monument 

Gadfly is a Notre Dame Ph.D. This article from the current *Notre Dame Magazine*.

Further evidence that the petition to remove the Columbus monument from our Rose Garden is not out of the ordinary.

Such movements are mainstream. People who believe otherwise are not paying attention.

There is little argument any more that the primary legacy of Columbus is horrible. The only real discussion is what to do about it.

Note that the Notre Dame solution was to cover the Columbus paintings with a representation of the local Indigenous people, an idea you'll recognize from Gadfly's commentary.

Gadfly — having discovered new local information — will be continuing his **Columbus conversation** soon.

Selections from **“Columbus Murals Covered,”** *Notre Dame Magazine*, Autumn 2020:

Paintings of Christopher Columbus no longer adorn the central corridor of Notre Dame's Main Building. The murals, which had incited controversy in recent times, have been covered with nature-themed fabric in rich shades of green, brown, rust and gold.



The coverings, like tapestries in their detail, depict trees, leaves, flowers, birds and other elements of the Midwestern landscape. Their borders reflect natural and geometric motifs of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi,

the tribe whose ancestral homelands include the area where Notre Dame now stands.

Columbus was a national hero in 1881, when Italian artist Luigi Gregori was commissioned by Notre Dame's unabashedly patriotic patriarch, Father Edward Sorin, CSC, to paint the 12 murals that would celebrate the achievements of the artist's famous countryman. The murals' somewhat curious prominence in the second-floor hallway of the Main Building may be best understood — at least historically — for their symbolic braiding of Catholicism, ethnic identity and national pride.



Heralded as the discoverer of a vast new world he claimed for Spain, the explorer was admired at this frontier school founded by French missionaries and home to many other European immigrants. In recent decades, however, the murals have come to represent a darker side of the Columbus legacy and what his arrival on these shores meant for the continent and those who had lived here for thousands of years. Student groups periodically called for them to be removed.

In 1997, when the controversy again erupted, the University offered a compromise by providing visitors with a pamphlet that acknowledged the discrepancy between the sensibilities of Gregori's time and those of the modern moment. Gregori, the brochure explains, portrayed Columbus "much as a hagiographer might tell the story of a missionary saint." Since then, many have expressed offense at the artist's depiction of the native people Columbus encountered — dressed in stereotypical and historically inaccurate attire — as being uncivilized, subservient heathens in need of saving.

Additionally, beyond the decimation of native cultures that followed his "discovery," more recent biographies of Columbus have documented the explorer's brutal treatment of Native Americans and his hauling hundreds back to Europe to be sold as chattel in the Seville slave market.

The controversy flared again in 2018, and this time — after years of deliberation — a decision was made. University president Rev. John I. Jenkins, CSC, '76, '78M.A. announced in January 2019 that the murals — rather than being removed or painted over — would be covered “by woven material consistent with the décor of the space.” High-resolution images of the murals would be available in another campus location and an exhibit that explains the murals and situates them in the context of University history would be installed.

Then, in an August 2020 letter discussing racism, justice and public discourse, Jenkins announced that the murals were now being covered.