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John Norton and the Ramsey County Courthouse Murals

Celebrated American muralist John Warner Norton (1876–1934) was born in Lockport, Illinois and spent most of his professional life based in Chicago. After studies at the Art Institute of Chicago at the turn of the century, he embarked on an artistic career that would span several decades and include numerous major mural commissions in public buildings. Large-scale murals as a significant public art form appeared in Chicago at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, also known as the World Fair. In his lifetime Norton would explore and refine the genre, achieving national renown.

As an artist trained in Chicago during a period of tremendous change and rapid industrialization, Norton emerged as an individualist, a modernist, and a progressive. The St. Paul murals, painted in the 1930s toward the very end of the artist's life, followed earlier mural commissions in Chicago including the Chicago Daily News Building and the Chicago Board of Trade, as well as many other projects throughout the Upper Midwest.

The specific circumstances of the commission and conceptualization of these murals are unknown. We know that they were painted in the early 1930s for this building and were installed in this space at that time. The artist apparently took as a general theme a celebration of the city's territorial and modern history, with a focus on transportation and progress. While many of Norton's earlier creative projects date to an era of prosperity, these murals date to Depression-era America when the country struggled to reemerge from shared economic hardship and loss. Compared to some of the artist's other works, these images suggest a particular compassion for the valor, hardships, and contributions of working people. Portrayal of common people in an architecturally significant space occurs elsewhere in the building, notably in the relief panel above the courthouse's north entrance (4th Street) created by architectural sculptor Lee Lowrie. Under the title *Vox Populi* ("Voice of the People") is a street scene of everyday folk, including a laborer with a pickaxe, a policeman blowing a whistle, schoolchildren, and a mother and child embracing.

A striking formal aspect of Norton's portraits is their pronounced verticality, each composition contained within an elongated, narrow rectangular form. This formal quality integrates deftly with the Art Deco

aesthetics found throughout this monumental building, which is characterized by dramatic vertical lines and a majestic, soaring sense of space. Norton has used this compositional form adeptly to focus on a single standing portrait in each of the four murals. Each figure symbolizes an era in the state's history and development, with industry understood to begin with the arrival of European explorers. In each of the four murals, below the primary image are various cartouches of other scenes relating to a particular era, as envisioned by the artist. In all cases the individuals represented are idealized or generic types rather than specific historical individuals. In this room's inward-looking space with relatively low lighting, the elongated vertical panel forms that each frame a single standing individual might recall the effect of stained glass windows, in this case presenting a secular conception of the saintly.

The panels are conceived with a chronological sequence in mind. They are arranged in the room moving from East to West, perhaps alluding to the arrival of immigrants and settlers from the east and westward expansion across the continent. In the southeast corner of the room, a fur-clad explorer references the earliest era of European and Native contact, primarily centered on the fur trade. A steamboat navigator is the major figure portrayed in the northeast quarter, with vignettes from this early era of migration to the territory by water navigation. On the western side of the room, at southwest a narrative of progress continues with the figure of the surveyor, whose knowledge and skills are essential to construct the human environment, especially railroads, that would quickly evolve into towns and cities. Finally the railway signalman at northwest who oversees the burgeoning city projects a vision of optimism for a future of production, expansion, and prosperity.

An unmissable aspect of these images to the contemporary viewer is their limited scope: clearly the major subjects are white males, and history appears to be imagined and viewed through their gaze. Women figure almost not at all. Native people are portrayed as subservient and caricaturish. The scarce imagery of African Americans is likewise minimal and stereotyped. Clearly, the artist is not portraying the history or people of St. Paul comprehensively. How are we to understand his intention? Primary sources about this project are lacking, and Norton's artistic vision undoubtedly expresses the explicit bias, ignorance, and racism of his time.

Yet Norton himself was in many ways progressive by the standards of the era. He admired Native cultures and had a lifelong interest in the Southwest as did his contemporary Georgia O'Keeffe. He was well traveled and was also interested in the arts of the Middle East and Japan. As an art educator, he was engaged with modernism and encouraged students to think for themselves, and to explore new aesthetic and creative possibilities. He was among the most beloved art instructors at the Art Institute of Chicago for several decades. At the end of Norton's life the Art Institute's director Robert Harshe commented, "John was the preeminent personality in the art of the Midwest and his death is the greatest blow that it could suffer," reflecting the respect and reputation that Norton enjoyed. Norton admired the work of Diego Rivera that heroicized common people. About the St. Paul panels, Norton stated, according to his biography, "I want them to be a sort of glorification of the ordinary guy that packed the canoes on the old portage, stacked the grain, drove the spikes and mixed the concrete."

The choice of these particular subjects, ordinary people, to be represented and displayed in the central chamber of civic debate and power is itself an important political statement by the city of St. Paul. Here

are represented not the most powerful politicians, nor the most valorous military leaders, nor the most wealthy, successful, or socially elite. Rather, common people are celebrated, lifted up in a place of honor and a space of great elegance to communicate the message that the real history, settlement, and construction of city and community are the shared fruits and labors of all working people. Along with his prejudices and limited view of history, in these paintings Norton presents himself as committed to the ideals of labor, the value of working people, and the possibility of a democratic society in which the future is both prosperous and communal.

Voyageur/explorer and scenes of Native people, voyageurs, and immigrants

John Warner Norton (1876–1934)

c. 1931–1933

Oil on canvas

Standing confidently, clad in a buckskin jacket and holding a canoe paddle, is a figure who appears to be a voyageur, representing the earliest Europeans who arrived in this region in the 1600s and alluding to the earliest form of water transportation for both Native people and explorers. The man's red head cloth is typical of Voyageur garb. Behind him in reddish hue are individuals who portage canoes, essential to the Fur Trade transit system that carried furs by waterways from Minnesota territory to commercial headquarters in Montreal. Below this central figure are several scenes of Native people and European explorers or immigrants. All figures are generalized types rather than historical individuals. Native people are portrayed primarily in subservient or subjugated roles: paddling a canoe, carrying a wagon, being preached to by a missionary priest. In the far right, a Native man brings furs to trade with a European outside a log cabin. Notably, the scenes include several essential Native contributions to European adaptation and survival in this harsh new climate: snowshoes, fur clothing and hats, and canoes themselves, not to mention knowledge of navigation and travel routes.

To contemporary viewers, these scenes of Native people appear stereotyped and prejudicial, presenting a limited and revisionist version of history. By the standards of his era, however, Norton was considered a progressive, was well-traveled, and had a lifelong interest in Native peoples of North and South America. Like several modernists of his day including Georgia O'Keeffe, he particularly appreciated the aesthetics and Native cultures of the American Southwest. Representations of Native people in the St. Paul mural recall imagery from a map mural in the library reading room at Loyola University in Chicago, where Native people are rendered as physically robust, cooperative, and compliant, and likewise portrayed as critical to the success of European explorers and immigrants.

The subject of Native people is essential elsewhere in the Ramsey County Courthouse, with the monumental onyx figure in the building's lobby, *Vision of Peace*. This sculpture by Swedish sculptor Carl Miles was dedicated in 1936 to the war veterans of Ramsey County, inspired according to the artist by a peace pipe ceremony he attended in Oklahoma. The sculpture takes to extraordinary heights the soaring verticality of this masterpiece Art Deco building, echoing the same formal quality chosen by Norton for his composition of his panels. Many American and international artists of the 1920s and 1930s were interested in Native cultures and the aesthetics of Native art, and formal design elements particularly from Southwestern cultures often figure in Art Deco motifs.

Steamboat navigator and early scenes of transportation and settlement

John Warner Norton (1876–1934)

c. 1931–1933

Oil on canvas

A man appears poised in mid-1800s attire, flanked by navigation wheels and meandering river and landscape on both sides. As the navigator or captain of a steamboat, his figure refers to the early era of immigration and settlement to the territory that became Minnesota and the locality that became the city of St. Paul. Here is represented the defining feature of city: its place on the Mississippi River. Steamboats, rather than covered wagons, were the earliest means of transport for settlers. Behind the central figure in reddish tones are images of early settlers bearing trunks and suitcases; in this scene is one of the few glimpses of women we find in these panels. Below are vignettes of river travel: turning the wheel, watching the river. At bottom left military officers meet with Native people, perhaps a reference to treaty signing, and at right African American men, viewed from behind, carry sacks to load a boat.

While Norton was interested in historical themes in many of his mural projects, here he displays limited knowledge of African American history in St. Paul, although he does include African American laborers as contributors to this early history. Themes in Norton's mural projects often relate to progress and development. In this case, while the individuals arriving from steamboats appear hopeful and forward-looking, a notable contrast in tone, and certainly social status, might be discerned in the lowest register where Native people and African Americans are represented. It is possible that Norton is deliberately portraying this small scene of African Americans in an antebellum (pre-Civil War) manner. He explored similar subject matter in courthouse murals in Birmingham, Alabama, where the Old South, including scenes of enslaved African Americans, is contrasted with the New South, where slavery has been abolished, and economic and industrial development have advanced.

An arresting feature of this painting is its treatment of landscape, with its almost surreal terrain, curvilinear water forms, and lower palette of yellow and greys rendering background and foliage in overlapping formations of fantastical shapes. Here a particularly Art Deco sensibility is expressed in the interplay of the representational and the stylized. The fanciful, decorative background designs of overlaid flattened forms may reflect the artist's well-known interest in Japanese aesthetics.

Surveyor and scenes of early railroad construction

John Warner Norton (1876–1934)

c. 1931–1933

Oil on canvas

Holding a surveyor's essential tools, a man stands assuredly, surrounded by scenes relating to railroad construction and history. Railroads are essential to the history of St. Paul, most notably in the person of J.J. Hill and his St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, which constructed the Great Northern Railway from St. Paul to Seattle. For several decades St. Paul was the major center of railroad transportation to all points in the American West.

Railroads made mass immigration and settlement of the North American continent possible and involved tremendous human labor in their construction. In these images, men, using a horse, transport raw materials, and various tools are employed to harvest wood and craft railroad ties. Clearly evident in multiple scenes is the sheer physical strain of the manpower required to lift and place metal pieces of track. Although Chinese laborers were essential to the construction of U.S. railroads and were employed by J.J. Hill, these working men appear to be almost entirely Caucasian. In this entirely male domain, laborers are resolute, in good health, and physically powerful.

The surveyor overseeing the scene meets the viewer's gaze with hopeful confidence. The circular, wheel-like form visible at the side of his surveying instrument is echoed by the orange circular shape behind him, representing in a stylized geometric form a train's locomotive. His head is slightly off center here, but nevertheless design and geometry converge to create the effect of an almost-halo.

As in the steamboat scenes, landscape is abstracted, with overlapping pastel forms alluding to forest, hills, greenery, and prairie. The decorative, gentle softness of the landscape belies the sheer physical hardship of the enterprise but enhances the sense of beauty in human endeavor.

Railroad signalman and the work of the city

John Warner Norton (1876–1934)

c. 1931–1933

Oil on canvas

A railroad signalman stands poised in front of an elegantly rendered two-light signal, with his gaze turned away from the viewer as though looking ahead or beyond. He stands in front of the abstracted and towering form of a train car, with a ladder suggesting its height. At right is a telephone or utility pole of the type that characteristically flanks train tracks, and whose installation was made possible by the expansion of railroads.

In this image, the last of the series, exploration, navigation, and the laying and operation of the railroads has brought us to a cityscape. Surrounding the worker are signs of vertical expansion as a city discovers itself and begins to build outward and upward. Hustle and bustle are suggested in the themes of the working men who are rendered in blue tones behind the central figure. Various vignettes encapsulate the essential activities of the city and its surrounding communities, where grain is harvested, and then packed and loaded to be transported by train, and the railroad is essential to commerce, travel, and progress. Below the cityscape at lower left a train engine accelerates upward across a bridge, as smoke billows behind. In the lowest center panel, an African American man carries baggage for a white couple traveling by train, a scene that is probably a reference to Pullman porters. St. Paul was major center of railway transit for the country, and many African American men in St. Paul were employed as Pullman porters in the early decades of the twentieth century, a respected profession that provided a middle-class standard of living. At lower right, a worker appears to pause a crane laden with I-beams, the essential steel building elements of modern buildings and skyscrapers. The city is taking shape before our eyes.

The scenes of physical labor, transport, train travel, and construction create a lively, energetic glimpse of urban life, where the earlier landscape is being rapidly transformed and the future is upward. For the first time in this series of paintings, we see numerous multistory buildings, some with their various floors

suggested by rectangular windows, and some simply delineated by the long vertical lines that are also found as a design motif throughout this courthouse building. A large rooftop water tower provides an element of realism. Notably, at the center of the cityscape and overlapping the signalman's lower right leg, is a large domed structure, towering prominently over the scene, certainly referring to the State Capitol building completed by Cass Gilbert in 1905. The familiar natural landscape in greens and blues is still evident, but it is the movement, vitality, and dynamism of the city that are the focus of this image and the culmination of our journey of progress. The future ahead is surely one of growth, industry, and optimism.

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