



By Angela Yoder

Art Appreciation in the Washington State Archives Collections  
This month: Mason-Spafford vs. State of Washington

## Freedom of Expression

Once upon a time there was modern art hanging in the classically designed Legislative building in Olympia. Two dynamic artists were commissioned by the state in 1981 to create new public artworks that would hang in the lunette areas of the House and Senate. In the House, artist Michael Spafford was chosen; for the Senate Chamber, Alden Mason (1919-2013). Spafford's work depicted the Twelve Labors of Hercules. The colors were bold black and white in an abstract style. The work immediately became controversial and deemed inappropriate for the building's architecture. Opinions of "outraged", "obscene" "disgraceful" were used to describe the murals. Mason's *Squeeze Bottle* period pieces appeared stylistically like fiber, were also deemed "too abstract" and "unbefitting" of the building. Mason's intention was to pay homage to the First Peoples of the state depicting water, mountains, and sky.



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Long story short: all murals were covered from view. The artists and their supports sued the state. Mason's murals that were merely bolted to the walls, were removed in 1987 and placed in storage for several years. He received no compensation. Spafford's work, mounted with a very strong adhesive, remained on the walls, covered up. In 1989 he was monetarily rewarded, the murals were removed at great expense, and sat in storage until 2003. Both artists' work are now on display at Centralia Community College in Lewis County. Spafford's high-contrast work graces their theater building, installed in 2003 while Mason's colorful mosaics decorate the campus library where they were installed in 1991.

Think about this; the state appropriated funds commissioning public artwork that was meant for you and me to see. Four pieces of artwork were created, yet adverse opinions took them away from us. When did the discussion of "appropriateness" come up, if at all in the process? Did the legislators have a right to axe the freedom of the artist's intent? They got the final say and their decision will forever keep all of us from experiencing the public art which once hung in the galleries. Ultimately, the artists were extremely unhappy their work was removed from the very spaces they were created for. How do you feel about public art being given and then taken away from you, decided by a few?

The state archives holds the entire court case and is available for your viewing. This is just one more example of the stories that we hold, for you. Come visit us; make an appointment to do some of your own investigating of state history.