

Lawmakers push for more diversity — women and minorities in Capitol art work

July 21, 2010

By Shira Poliak

When Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio) first came to Congress, she was taken aback by the Capitol's artwork.



“I never worked in a building with so many old men on the wall,” Kaptur said in a recent interview, reflecting on her arrival to Washington in 1983. “It is true that the men’s pictures on the wall represent American history. But they don’t represent the only history.”

Why were there so few females, black people and other minorities depicted in the Capitol’s art? she wondered.

Determined to add another dimension to the art collection, Kaptur helped commission portraits of female leaders and petitioned other lawmakers to hang paintings of women that were collecting dust in the building’s basement and storage rooms.

Kaptur is still focused on this goal, and an increasing number of lawmakers share her belief that the Capitol collections should portray a more comprehensive spectrum of congressional and American history. They are working within their legislative powers, and with Capitol curators and historians, to influence what hangs in the halls of Congress.

Among Kaptur’s accomplishments in this area are commissioning the portrait of Jeannette Rankin, the first female member of Congress, and recovering the portrait of Mary Norton, the first Democratic congresswoman, from a Capitol storage room.

And in a precedent-setting move, Slave Labor Task Force leaders Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) and Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.) unveiled plaques last month honoring the black slaves who built the Capitol. The plaques now hang in the Capitol Visitor Center (CVC). At the ceremony, the first public recognition of the slaves' contribution, Lewis reiterated Kaptur's position.

"The history of the Capitol, like the history of the nation, should be complete," he said. Of the Capitol collection's thousands of pieces, 37 depict women, 23 depict black Americans and 64 depict American Indians.

"These buildings truly have to reflect this country, not perpetuate a small spectrum of it," Rep. Mike Honda (D-Calif.) said. "These buildings become instructional tools. Look at all the children who come through these doors each day."

When people from more diverse backgrounds get elected to Congress, "we get to exercise our options," Honda said. He commissioned the portrait of Dalip Saund, the first Asian American congressman. It was unveiled in 2007 and now hangs on the east stairwell, off the House chamber. Honda views his spot on the Appropriation Committee's Legislative Branch subcommittee as another means to advocate for this cause, which he said demands perseverance.

"It has been a challenge to get the commitment, the attention, from the leadership," Honda said. "Their desires may be there, but we have to be persistent." But historians and curators maintain that amending or amplifying the collection requires more than persistence and commitment. They say their financial, structural and creative parameters complicate their efforts.

The Senate art collection has two permanent installations: busts of each vice president — the president of the Senate — and portraits of majority and minority leaders and presidents pro tempore. The House continuously commissions portraits of the Speakers and committee chairmen. Preserving and updating these permanent collections leaves little room to acquire new pieces, curators and historians say.

Curators see two other problems, both having to do with the lack of free wall space: The removal of artwork already on display could lead to complaints, and the hanging of contemporary pieces next to more traditional ones would have a disharmonious effect. "Putting one modern piece in the context of George Washington-era pieces doesn't make sense," Senate Curator Diane Skvarla said. "If you are going to look at contemporary history, we need to look at the whole collection and make a plan. When you add [a portrait of the first black congresswoman] Shirley Chisholm next to 18th-century people, it has a jarring element. We need to do it in a systematic way."

But even if space were available, ethics rules forbid curators from soliciting money for commissions. They must rely on donations or other appropriate funds.

Moreover, depicting historical movements and 20th-century events, which lawmakers like Kaptur call for, would be even more challenging, historians say.

“We need some distance from events to decide what was significant and what deserves to be commemorated. Some breathing space is needed,” Senate Historian Don Ritchie said. “Even the rules in the Senate for commissioning art require some time to pass before the items can be officially successional to the Senate, partly because it’s hard at the immediate moment to make those kinds of decisions, and you need some hindsight to put things into perspective.”

The Architect of the Capitol’s office did not respond to multiple requests for interviews, and the House curator did not have permission to speak on the subject.

Skvarla said that, despite these obstacles, the curatorial and historical staffs constantly assess the diversity of the collection’s subjects. The portraits of former Sens. Blanche Kelso Bruce (R-Miss.), the first black senator, and Margaret Chase Smith (R-Maine), the first woman to be elected to both the House and Senate, reflect these efforts, she said. Skvarla welcomed the creation of a committee to brainstorm ways to depict American social and political movements in the 20th century but recognized the challenges and lack of consensus it would pose.

The CVC reflects a more diverse spectrum of Congress and American history, according to Senate and House historians. In the atrium, called Emancipation Hall, there are 18 statues — seven of women, five of American Indians and one of a black American. This stands in contrast to National Statuary Hall, where only one woman and one American Indian stand among the 35 statues.

Lawmakers are delighted by the CVC’s statue collection.

“To me, those are America,” said Rep. Vernon Ehlers (R-Mich.), a former chairman of the House Administration Committee. “The Founders are no more representative of America than the other statues.”

Ehlers helped commission the portrait of Chisholm, and the piece of art now hangs on the Capitol’s first floor.

He said the collection demands “continuous monitoring and surveillance,” adding that less costly, smaller changes can be made to educate lawmakers, staffers and journalists about the figures the portraits honor.

For example, the Speaker’s Lobby is lined with portraits of former House Speakers. “It would be nice to have booklets talking about each of the people displayed in the lobby, increasing people’s knowledge of the nation and the Capitol,” Ehlers said.

House Deputy Historian Fred Beuttler said the collection will become more diverse as portraits are commissioned to honor female and minority lawmakers who assume leadership positions.

“It’s extremely important to recognize the ‘firsts,’ but it’s more important to show and watch the process by which the leadership of the House becomes more diverse, because that’s where the power is in the House,” Beuttler said. He says portraits of current and former committee chairmen, like Reps. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) and John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.), who are both black, and Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-N.Y.), will diversify the collection.

“That’s the more important portrayal ... that I think is really exciting,” he said. But Kaptur isn’t entirely convinced.

“I don’t think that the portrait of all committee chairs does it, either,” she said. “What about the history? What we’ve done for the founding of the republic in its first century, the preservation of the union in the second, the triumph of liberty over tyranny in the third? We’re missing the big picture,” she said. “How exciting it would be to work with historians from each century of American life and let them see how well the Capitol reflects that period — and then make recommendations.”