

Dielman Mosaics

The fourth Capitol Commission was given the task of finishing the Capitol. They were to continue the decorating and to specifically decide what works of art would fill the large east wall of the building. This was a large space that was bare and as such gave the building an unfinished look.

From the start, the commissioners determined that the upper portion of the wall would be a mosaic as the bold colors of a mosaic would never fade, and they would last over time. A mosaic would also provide great visual strength and power to anchor the east wall as it would be viewed from a great distance and needed to be as admired as the Blashfield painting, *Westward*, on the lower portion of the east wall. Further, architecturally, the portion of the east wall that would hold the mosaics was composed of six arched panels each measuring 6 feet by 14 feet in size. Additionally, when considering the subject of the work, the art was not to depict a specific event in Iowa history or any of its people living or dead.

After an extensive search, they chose a renowned mural artist, Frederick Dielman, to do this work. He designed each of the panels to stand alone and yet have the continuity to still be connected. Three of the panels were to symbolically depict the three branches of government—Legislative, Executive, and Judicial. The remaining three panels would represent the responsibility of government Defense, Charities, and Education. A special addition to the panels was to include a picture of our state Capitol as the background of the center panels.

To tackle this large work of art, Dielman first made fully colored, detailed oil paintings for each panel at one-third scale. From these paintings, he drew a full-size outline of each panel on paper. Dielman then traveled to Venice, Italy, with his paintings and outlined panels. Once there, artisans were hired, taking the oil paintings and their outlines and setting to work. With the oil paintings as their guide, they filled in the full-size drawings with small pieces of glass tiles. Once the outlines were positioned, brown paper was pasted over the full-size panels. Each panel was labeled and cut into sections. They were then prepared for shipping to Iowa.

In Des Moines, the upper portion of the east wall was covered with Portland cement. Upon the arrival of the mosaics, each labeled section was placed in the cement in their appropriate spot. When the cement had thoroughly dried, the brown paper was moistened and removed, exposing the beautiful glass mosaics.

The mosaics, put in place in 1908, have most certainly provided the sense of power and place that was imagined by the artist. They are certainly one of the favorites for visitors to the statehouse, as they are amazed daily with the work done in this most impressive manner.

More information:

<https://www.legis.iowa.gov/resources/tourCapitol/pictorial/today/secondFloor/mosaics>