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THE PROGRESSIVE CONTEXT OF THE NEBRASKA CAPITOL THE COLLABORATION OF GOODHUE AND TACK

FREDERICK C. LUEBKE

Augustus Vincent Tack (1870-1949) was the first of eight artists who executed murals in the Nebraska state capitol.¹ His involvement began in fall 1923, when he was asked by the architect, Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue (1869-1924), to plan a program of mural decorations for the governor's suite of offices, located in the first part of the capitol to be completed. His murals were installed four years later, and the rooms were opened to the public on 1 January 1928. Tack's work was thus conceived, executed, and installed several years before the construction of the capitol

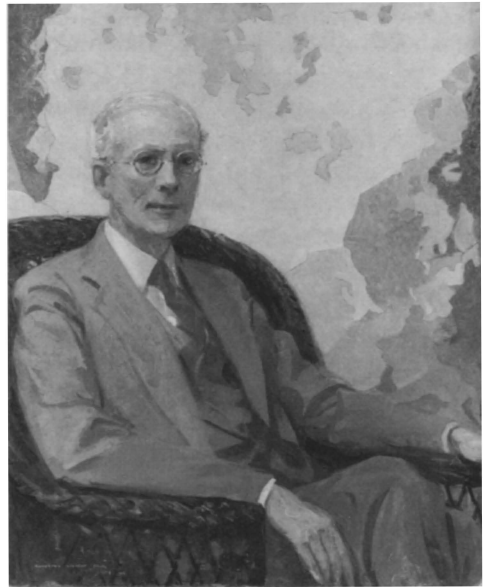


FIG. 1. Augustus Vincent Tack painted this Self-Portrait sometime in the 1940s, nearly twenty years after his engagement as a muralist for the Nebraska State Capitol. It is unique in that it personalizes his self-portraiture with a background done in his distinctive "abstract-expressionist" technique. Courtesy The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

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was completed in 1932. At first glance, the Tack murals, with their late medieval feeling, may seem archaic and perhaps lacking congruence with the spirit of the building. Further investigation, however, reveals them to be in perfect harmony with the architect's intentions.

Although Tack's work is not well known, art historians have been intrigued by his aesthetic sensibilities. How could this artist produce work so radically different in spirit and manner as his Nebraska murals and the fascinating abstractions in the Phillips Gallery in Washington, and moreover, do it at the same time?²² (Cf. Fig. 5 and 7.) The easy answer is that he needed the money. Commissions for such work as the murals, like his portraiture of the rich and famous, paid well and helped to sustain the opulent lifestyle to which he was accustomed.

But we must probe deeper. I suggest that a part of the answer—and I do not wish to claim too much—can be found by considering the spirit of the times in which he lived. Of course, Tack's lifetime as an artist bridged several periods—from the *fin de siècle* to the horrific years of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. But the time that concerns us most is the Progressive era—the decade that preceded the First World War and whose influence arguably extended into the 1920s when Tack did his Nebraska murals.

Most Americans will readily identify the Progressive Era as a period of positive reform early in the twentieth century when large doses of democracy were administered to the body politic to cure its ills. The wholesale adoption of remedial devices such as the initiative, referendum, and recall spring to mind, as do primary elections, municipal reforms, direct election of U.S. senators, the income tax, women's suffrage, the Federal Reserve system of banking, anti-trust legislation, pure food and drug legislation, and so on.

The wave of Progressive reform hit Nebraska in 1907. First a Republican and then a Democratic legislature enacted much Progressive legislation, including a primary election

law, railroad regulation, a child labor law, a board of pardons, a bank guaranty law, and the nonpartisan election of judges. A few years later Nebraska adopted both women's suffrage and the prohibition of alcoholic beverages. Although many historians have argued that the Progressive movement ended with World War I, it continued in Nebraska into the post-war period, when in 1920 the state modernized its constitution in conformance with Progressive principles. By any measure, it was a time of remarkable political energy for Nebraska.

But the Progressive movement was much more than a series of political reforms. It was a frame of mind, a set of ideals and moral attitudes that conditioned habits of thought among American leaders, political and otherwise. It was a hopeful time when Americans thought that peace, justice, and righteousness could be realized as never before, a time when they optimistically believed that practical idealism and applied Christianity could remake society. The Progressive mentality influenced much intellectual activity: the social sciences were profoundly affected, and so was the world of art—literature, music, painting, and architecture—though less obviously.

Robert Crunden, a leading student of American culture in the Progressive Era, provides a key to understanding the American artist in those years. The typical writer, composer, painter, or architect, Crunden tells us, felt a keen tension between innovation and nostalgia. Such a person

was full of new ideas about religious and political life . . . [and] at the same time, like progressives in other disciplines, he [*sic*] had a nostalgia for the past: for the small town, for religious certainty, for the morality of his parents, and for the America that always seemed to exist about the time he was born. This tension between old and new helped generate art, but it also made that art confusing and contradictory. Most often, the new ideas found themselves in works of art that were based on traditional

forms, as if the comfort of old forms took the sting out of the threat of new ideas. . . . But with the greatest artists, innovation and nostalgia fused to create works . . . which remain the chief monuments of progressive creativity.³

Here Crunden has in mind such painters as Robert Henri, William Glackens, John Sloan, in music the *sui generis* Charles Ives, and in architecture the American genius, Frank Lloyd Wright. Although much Progressive accomplishment in the arts has the appearance of modern, we must not think of these artists as Modernists. Crunden reminds us that Modernism, a far more creative movement that was well advanced in Europe at the time, is what killed Progressivism in the arts. European Modernists stressed “form over content, the lack of responsibility of the artist to society, the simultaneity of past and present time, and the expression of three dimensions in two.” But Progressive artists were of a different spirit. They rejected, sometimes vehemently, the Modernist notion of “art for art’s sake.” In their view, art was associated with human feeling; art and life could not be separated. Unlike the Modernists, preeminent Progressive artists such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Charles Ives were, in Crunden’s words, “deeply involved in family ideals. . . . Their central aesthetic concern was with nature, and they remained ever conscious that nature was an expression of God.”⁴

In Nebraska the Progressive mentality continued strongly at the end of World War I in November 1918. Just a week before the Armistice, citizens swept the Democrats from the statehouse and elected Progressive-minded Republicans to state government. The new governor was Samuel R. McKelvie. This young, aggressive, thirty-seven-year-old publisher of *The Nebraska Farmer* was a classic Progressive eager for political reform. When McKelvie and other public figures urged that the state erect a new, monumental capitol as a memorial to the state’s soldiers who had died in the war, Nebraskans agreed with little dissent. Within

seven weeks of his inauguration, Governor McKelvie happily signed a bill to create a commission for the planning and construction of this grand enterprise.⁵

The newly appointed commissioners quickly engaged the services of a professional advisor, Thomas R. Kimball of Omaha, a distinguished architect then serving as president of the American Institute of Architects.⁶ Kimball led the commissioners to approve a procedure that would attract submissions from the finest architectural firms in the United States. In January 1920 the commission issued its program statement, a document that fused innovation with nostalgic sentiment. Unlike most competitions for such public buildings erected in those years, it offered no directives governing plan, style, or materials. By granting so much freedom, the commission intended to stimulate innovation among the competitors. As one architectural historian describes it, the terms of the competition were “an artist’s dream.”⁷

At the same time, the commissioners were keenly sensitive to the symbolism Nebraskans would assign to the new statehouse. Using language enriched by Progressive accents, they declared that the structure would express the people’s respect for the state’s traditions and “their belief in [Nebraska’s] importance and worth, and their love of its fair name.” The commissioners called for “an inspiring monument worthy of the state for which it stands; a thing of beauty so conceived and fashioned to properly record and exploit our civilization, aspirations and patriotism, past, present, and future.”⁸

As Kimball hoped, the Nebraska competition stimulated nationwide attention. According to one prestigious architectural journal, it was “an interesting moment in American architecture” that marked a radical departure “from the established precedent for state capitols.”⁹ Among the finalists were some of the best-known architectural firms in the United States, including John Russell Pope, H. Van Buren Magonigle, Paul Cret, and the grand master of public architecture of the late

nineteenth century—the firm of McKim, Mead, and White, then in its last days. All of the finalists were cultural conservatives, if one is to judge by the designs they submitted for the competition; none were Progressives in any political sense, including the winner, Bertram Goodhue. All shared in the eclecticism of the age, and most adhered to the principles and traditions of the *École des Beaux Arts* of Paris.¹⁰

What are the characteristics of Beaux-Arts eclecticism in architecture? Strict adherence to compositional “laws”; devotion to symmetry; monumentality at the expense of function; integration of lavish decorative elements; grand staircases both internal and external; impressive enclosures of huge, internal spaces through the dramatic use of arches. Above all, it meant emphasis on the “correct” use of “approved” styles. But Beaux-Arts principles also allowed the architect, as architectural historian William Jordy puts it, “to rummage the gamut of historical styles for his detailing,” and then “to work eclectically within a chosen style.” Although it was permissible to use Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, or whatever, the American public of the Progressive Era seemed to believe that public buildings (and especially state capitols) should be designed in a neo-classic Renaissance style. The national capitol in Washington was the prototype, with its columns, domes, pediments, porticoes, pilasters, balustrades, and monumental staircases, all massed in perfect symmetry.¹¹ More than mere revivalism, Beaux-Arts eclecticism was a mode that looked to the past for inspiration in order to serve the civic values of its own time.

All of the state capitols designed and built during the two decades before the First World War adhere to Beaux-Arts principles; all are examples of what is termed the American Renaissance. McKim, Mead, and White, perhaps the most famous architectural firm in the country, set the pace in 1891 with the design for the Rhode Island capitol, which featured a prominent portico with staircase, matching wings, and a carefully proportioned, colon-

naded dome. A similar but more sumptuous design won the Minnesota commission for Cass Gilbert in 1895. Both structures were completed early in the twentieth century. Other commissions followed: South Carolina, Montana, South Dakota, Arkansas, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Idaho, Kentucky, Utah, and Wisconsin. By no means were all aesthetically successful, but the climax of the American Renaissance appeared in Washington State with the design by the firm of Wilder & White for a cluster of buildings in Olympia on a splendid promontory rising above an arm of Puget Sound.¹²

Studying the state capitols of the Progressive era helps us to understand why Goodhue’s plan for Nebraska won the competition so easily and why it attracted immediate and international acclaim. Critics declared Goodhue’s conception to be a complete break with the past, or so it seemed to eyes accustomed to the visual platitudes of Beaux-Arts classicism.¹³ But it was hardly that. Instead, it was a brilliant modification—a daring departure from the academicism that had stifled public architecture for two decades.

Actually, reverence for the past is everywhere evident in Goodhue’s capital. One of the most influential American architects of his time, Goodhue had been strongly attracted to medievalism. He had an affinity for the Pre-Raphaelites, that powerful group of nineteenth-century English artists who urged a return to aesthetic values that antedated the Renaissance. He was charmed by the work of Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris. His early fame as an architect rested largely on his revival of neo-Gothic forms in church architecture, some of it highly innovative. And Goodhue was a major figure in the revival of the Spanish colonial style that swept the American southwest after the 1911 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, which he helped design.¹⁴

Born into an old, genteel Connecticut Yankee family, less prosperous than formerly, Goodhue was largely self-educated. He had begun his life in architecture as a draftsman,

and had climbed to national prominence in partnership with Ralph Adams Cram, a profoundly conservative architect with whom he shared many cultural values and attitudes, professionally and personally.¹⁵ Both possessed powerful and complex personalities, Cram the more domineering, Goodhue the more mercurial. Theirs was not an easy partnership, and after a trial separation in which Goodhue ran their New York office and Cram reigned in Boston, Goodhue decided in 1914 to dissolve the partnership.¹⁶

Goodhue had begun to seek new directions in his work about 1910. Even though some of his work during the next half decade followed old patterns, he gradually evolved a simpler and freer mode of expression. He began to question the validity of historical forms in relation to new technologies, materials, and methods.¹⁷ This evolution was particularly evident in his confrontations with public architecture.

Goodhue's developing notions are readily discerned in his design for the National Academy of Science, situated on the Mall in Washington, D.C. This interesting building, though not a smashing architectural success, is clearly a prelude to the Nebraska project in some of its rhythms, its decorative elements, and Goodhue's close collaboration with the mosaicist Hildreth Meiere.¹⁸

The central feature of the Nebraska design is the dramatic dome-capped tower, which rests on a broad, horizontal base. Proportional relationships between these elements are well balanced. Monumentality bespeaks the authority and dignity of the state, though not in oppressive way. Lines are clean and decorative elements emerge from the design; the exterior is largely free of fussy detail, for by that time Goodhue saw decoration in functionalist terms.¹⁹ Although Goodhue emphatically rejected the vocabulary of Beaux-Arts classicism, he retained its formal principles: he banished columns, pediments, entablatures, and the like from the exterior, but symmetry, balance, monumentality, an imposing staircase leading to the main entrance, and even



FIG. 2. Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue was photographed in 1924 shortly before his untimely death. Courtesy Division of Administrative Services, Building Division, Nebraska Capitol Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska.

the classic elements of base, shaft, and cap are there.²⁰ Even though the capitol dominates the Lincoln horizon and can be seen from miles away, it is not a skyscraper like the Woolworth Building that preceded it or the Empire State Building that followed. Its tower is part of the design, not its essence.

Approaching the main entrance of the building from the north, visitors ascend a monumental staircase; passing through a huge portico they enter an expansive interior defined by powerful rounded arches and decorated lavishly with colorful mosaics and



FIG. 3. *Frederick MacDonald, a distinguished Lincoln photographer, captured this image of the Nebraska State Capitol at the time of its completion in April 1934. Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.*

polished marble columns. Goodhue designed a neo-Renaissance space (with Byzantine overtones) unmistakably posing as a secular cathedral, complete with vestibule, nave, and a brilliant rotunda at the crossing.²¹ Legislative chambers are off to the two sides like transepts; there is no choir or apse, but in their places are the precincts of the secular priests, the judges of the Supreme Court. In such an interior Goodhue's imagination could run riot; here this master draftsman could revel in beauty, glory in the artistic achievements of Western civilization, and put it all

to the service of civic virtue in the Progressive manner.

Even though Goodhue was himself a gifted artist—Thomas Talmadge called him “the darling of the draughting-room”—he naturally left the decorative arts to others.²² He provided the grand conception; sculptors, muralists, mosaicists were to work out the details. Early on Goodhue discovered that, with so encompassing a project, he needed the assistance of someone more broadly educated than he, not only in Nebraska and regional history, but also in the history of Western culture. Such

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FIG. 4. The colorful interior of the capitol contrasts sharply with the comparatively plain but powerfully massed exterior. The foyer, viewed here from the vestibule, resembles the nave of a church richly decorated in an ornate Byzantine style. Photograph by Sidney Spelts, courtesy Division of Administration Services, Building Division, Nebraska Capitol Collections.

a person could develop the entire symbolological program of the capitol and coordinate the work of collaborating artists. Goodhue found his man in Dr. Hartley Burr Alexander, professor of philosophy at the University of Nebraska. He also got a poet and an anthropologist in the bargain. By September 1923, following several highly successful consultations, Goodhue and the Capitol Commission had formally charged Alexander with the duties of symbolologist for the project.²³

The backgrounds and temperaments of these two strong personalities were rather different, and disagreements were to be expected.²⁴ In most instances, Goodhue gratefully recognized Alexander's expertise and accepted his counsel. A significant exception was Goodhue's insistence on giving the contract for the murals in the governor's suite of offices to Augustus Vincent Tack, a painter whose ideas seemed to harmonize with his own.²⁵

Goodhue's commitment to Tack must be understood in the light of an earlier dispute. In 1921 Goodhue had a spat with the Capitol Commissioners over the appointment of Lee Lawrie as the sculptor for the project. Lawrie had collaborated effectively with Goodhue on several earlier projects and had earned his admiration. But the commissioners believed that they were obliged to put artwork out for bids. Goodhue heatedly described such a course as preposterous. After all, it was Lawrie who had designed the program of sculptures. Was someone else to execute Lawrie's ideas? The two functions, he fumed, could not be separated arbitrarily, as the commission seemed to wish.²⁶ Alexander also emphasized that the task of collaborating artists "is in a very direct sense a legacy from the architect."²⁷ Goodhue got his Lawrie.

In autumn 1923 Goodhue approached Tack with the possibility of his doing the murals for the governor's reception room, which, it was commonly said, he intended "to be the most beautiful room in the world."²⁸ Tack responded with a four-page proposal outlining his proposals, and on 1 December 1923 Goodhue dispatched them to Alexander for review. In an

accompanying letter, he said that he was disposed to favor Tack, whom he described as "a strongly individualistic artist" with experience in mural painting, notably in the Manitoba legislative assembly building in Winnipeg. Tack, Goodhue continued, was in full sympathy "with what we are trying to do." He expressed reservations about Tack's technique, which he described as "pointilliste," but added that in personal conversations Tack had promised to abandon that method "in favour of a combination of Burne Jones [sic], Pinturricchio [sic], and Benozzo Gazzoli [sic]."²⁹ Thus Goodhue revealed his own predilections for both the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic and old masters of the Italian Renaissance.

Upon reading Tack's proposal, Alexander objected vehemently. He fired off a four-page, single-spaced typewritten missive in which he blasted Tack's proposals as depressingly eclectic, a mishmash of "Greek, Latin, Scriptural, modern and Chinese allusions," erroneous in some details, indefensible, overdone, confused both in idea and materials, and filled with references that would be meaningless to Nebraskans. Alexander offered substitute ideas that he considered more appropriate for the office of the chief executive. He endorsed a suggestion made by Governor McKelvie that inscriptions from "men great in American history" be used, especially a quotation from Washington's Farewell Address. Alternatively, Alexander argued for a historical series on "the opening up of the Great Plains." The capitol, he claimed, was literally the climax of that great movement.³⁰

Goodhue reported back that Alexander's critique left Tack "a trifle grieved at first." He enclosed a revision that Tack had prepared—only minor changes were made—and offered a historical plan alternative to Alexander's. In a separate letter to Goodhue, Tack argued that Alexander's proposed historical series called for mere illustration and that "the Cowboy, Indian, Pioneer, Covered Wagon kind of thing" had been done in the Missouri state capitol "with not any great success."³¹ Perhaps the most distressing feature of Tack's

substitute proposal was his idea to depict Pere Marquette passing the mouth of the Platte River in 1673. Tack got the date right but he confused the Mississippi River with the Missouri. One can only imagine the fury and contempt that such carelessness must have aroused in the excitable Professor Alexander, especially when Goodhue cautiously wrote that he was "inclined to back Tack's position with regard to the historical stuff."³²

Contrary to Goodhue's hopes and expectations, the Capitol Commissioners did not award the contract for the murals early in 1924. Late in January Goodhue informed Alexander that it would not have been politically expedient to press the issue. Goodhue added that "if we—you, Tack and I—do argue over the scheme we can do that later."³³

But "later" never happened. Goodhue died of an heart attack on 23 April long before the question of content was resolved.³⁴ His firm was quickly reorganized as the Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue Associates, which carried the work to completion.

In June the capital commissioners traveled to New York to negotiate new arrangements with the Goodhue Associates. Their itinerary included a visit with Tack in his huge studio in Grand Central Station, where they inspected his preliminary studies. Finally, on 25 September 1925, after more than another year had passed, they unanimously agreed to Tack's request of \$48,500 for the job. Nearly two years later, on 28 June 1927, they also authorized Tack to do the murals for the lunettes and dome in the governor's private office for an additional fee of \$15,000.³⁵ All the work was done on canvas in Tack's studio and then, late in November, shipped to Lincoln. Installation followed in December.³⁶ The rooms were opened to the public on 1 January 1928, when according to newspaper accounts, eleven thousand Nebraskans braved sub-zero weather and trooped through the suite to view this latest expression of public art and architecture.³⁷

Who was this muralist whom Goodhue found so congenial?³⁸ Born in Pittsburgh in 1870 to a devoutly Roman Catholic family

whose wealth came from the petroleum industry, Tack was educated in Jesuit schools in New York before studying with John Twachtman and Harry Siddons Mowbray at the Art Students League from 1890 to 1895. The most powerful influence on Tack's art came from John LaFarge, a prodigious talent who had befriended him early in his career. According to art historian Leslie Furth, LaFarge was for Tack "the archetypal artistic persona," and Tack's enthusiasm for Oriental mysticism, his use of photography, and his interest in the Old Masters were due in part to this man whom Tack, even in old age, revered as his master. Second only to LaFarge in importance for Tack's career was the patronage and personal friendship of Duncan Phillips, a wealthy collector in Washington, D.C. who championed Tack's art from 1914 to his dying day.³⁹

Like many other young artists of his time, Tack studied briefly in France—the summer months of 1893 and '95—where he may have had his first exposure to the ideas of the Symbolists, a coterie of French writers and painters in the late nineteenth century who, eager to unify the arts, rejected prevailing notions of realism in favor of the metaphysical and mysterious in human experience.⁴⁰ Their ideas, Tack discovered, seemed congruent with what he liked in Chinese and Japanese culture, especially the dualistic philosophy of yin and yang that postulates opposing natural forces in all facets of life "that transcend time and place in eternal balance."⁴¹ Mix all that, add a dose of medievalism and Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics, and we get the eclecticism that the Nebraska professor of philosophy found so distressing about Tack's proposal for the murals in the reception room.

Tack first began to harmonize his divergent ideas in 1920 when he was fifty years old. In that year he completed murals for the house chamber of the Manitoba legislative assembly building in Winnipeg.⁴² Following their installation and dedication, he went farther west to Banff, Alberta, for a vacation in the Canadian Rockies, where he was deeply impressed by the romantic grandeur of that



FIG. 5. Augustus Vincent Tack completed *The Voice of Many Waters* in 1923 or 1924. A large painting ($77\frac{3}{4}'' \times 47\frac{7}{8}''$), this is the first of the remarkable series of abstractions for which Tack is best known today. Courtesy The Phillips Collection.

mountainous landscape. It seemed to offer possibilities for reconciling a particular tension in his artistic life: the need to bring into balance his conservative impulses with modernist ideas.⁴³ According to art historian Eleanor Green, he “was a painter in search of radical form with traditional content.” Perhaps he could “establish an analogy between nature and metaphysical reality through form, line, and color.”⁴⁴

Tack’s Canadian experience inspired him to produce, in the early 1920s, innovative paintings that laid the foundation for his reputation as a forerunner of abstract expressionism. The climax of this early series was *The Voice of Many Waters* (1923-24). Here Tack abstracted the shapes and forms of a rugged, mountainous landscape—snowy peaks, jumbled rocks, tumbling cascades, a grassy knoll, an opalescent cloud—and harmonized them in patches of luminous colors. Variant blues both light and dark, hues of pinks, and pale yellows are vitalized by smaller swatches of greens, deep reds, and purples. The colors appear in flat, fragmentary planes; variation is often achieved by scraping or otherwise stressing the surface to reveal hidden colors or surfaces. Space is compressed and perspective all but obliterated to create an abstracted landscape vaguely reminiscent of a Chinese scroll painting. An impressive achievement, this painting was a harbinger of many mysterious, enigmatic, fascinating abstractions to come later in the 1920s and ’30s.

The Voice of Many Waters helps us to understand Tack’s murals in the governor’s suite. In his plans for the reception room, the architect, Bertram Goodhue, displayed a good deal more nostalgia than innovation. It was his idea that the reception room (an impressive space 40 feet long and 22 feet wide) should evoke the Italian Renaissance. He designed it to have a barrel vault that soars 26 feet above the floor, and he placed a large fireplace at the west end. Spaces above the three windows on the north side penetrate the ceiling vault; they are balanced by three matching indentations on the opposite side. All the murals appear above

richly finished wood wainscoting about seven feet high.

As finally executed and installed in 1927, Tack’s murals for the reception room had undergone considerable revision since his initial proposals in 1923.⁴⁵ Tack all but ignored Alexander’s advice, and Alexander in turn specifically excluded the governor’s suite from his claim to have been responsible for the symbology of the entire capitol.⁴⁶ Some of Tack’s original ideas remain, and generally the scheme was conceptually and aesthetically secure.

The subject matter—such themes as the Virtues of the State, Equality Before the Law, the Virtues of Citizenship—conformed easily enough to the values of the Progressive era. They are all proper, laudable, and unavoidably sterile. Perhaps his choice of themes was in some indirect way related to naive Progressive optimism—the idea that such positive, visual exhortations will inspire citizens to civic righteousness and public service.

As he promised Goodhue, Tack avoided French *pointillisme* as well as any Impressionism he may have picked up from his former teacher John Twachtman. Possibly as a concession to Alexander, he eliminated the Orientalism he had learned to love from his friend John LaFarge. He adopted a style that, like the room itself, harked back to Italian art before Raphael. More important, Tack’s murals were entirely consonant with Goodhue’s intentions. During a trip to Italy in 1924, Tack made a special point of studying Italian models in Siena and Perugia.⁴⁷ No doubt he sought out murals by Pinturicchio, Gozzoli, and other muralists of the early Italian Renaissance, as Goodhue wished, though his exposure to Giotto may have been more important.⁴⁸

Upon entering the governor’s reception room, one is impressed by its dominating spirit of archaism. Tack’s murals are abstractions, like paintings on the walls of Egyptian tombs. Tack himself said that his figures “decorate the surface of the wall much in the way the Greeks employed the figure to decorate the surface of a vase.”⁴⁹ They are formal, flat, two-dimensional, sharply delineated, and appear



FIG. 6. Bertram Goodhue's lingering delight in medieval and renaissance architectural forms is manifest in his plan for the Governor's Reception Room. All the murals in this room were designed and executed by Augustus Vincent Tack between 1923 and 1928. The panel entitled *The Voice of God is as the Sound of Many Waters* appears in the left. Photograph by Sidney Spelts, courtesy Department of Administrative Services, Building Division, Nebraska Capitol Collections.

in generalized light. They are clothed in archaic dress, Greek or possibly Byzantine. There is no background, no perspective. Although his colors are lively, his people are wan and languid, their expressions lifeless. More in the style of Giotto's fourteenth-century figures than Gozzoli's vibrant fresco in the Riccardi Palace, Tack's Nebraska murals lack the vitality that infuses other murals he executed about the same time, such as the altar painting in the chapel of St. Thérèse in the Paulist Church of New York.⁵⁰ They are, however, directly related to his murals in the Manitoba Legisla-

tive Building, which were painted in 1918. In that series, Tack's figures, all of which represent abstract concepts, are similarly formal and isolated without background or perspective, but are painted in his impressionistic or pointillist style.⁵¹

One can only wonder what Tack would have produced had he been given free reign in the governor's suite. After all, this work was conceived at the same time when he was developing a radically different style—the style of *The Voice of Many Waters* and those other brilliant coloristic precursors of abstract expressionism

for which he is best known today. That painting was obviously on his mind as he planned the Nebraska murals late in 1923, which is when they were shown publicly for the first time.

Thus it was no coincidence that Tack's earliest proposal for the governor's reception room included a panel bearing the inscription "The Voice of God is as the Sound of Many Waters." Tack explained that the mural was to represent "Vox Dei—the voice of God, or as it is expressed in Revelations, the Voice of Many Waters."⁵² It was to occupy the central space on the south wall, which was to be dedicated to "the three great liberties of the people"—"Liberty of Speech, Liberty of Divine Worship, [and] the Rights of Suffrage."⁵³

Listen to the words Tack originally used in 1923 to describe his intentions for the Nebraska panel and compare them, not to what he actually painted for the capitol, but rather to his painting of the same name in the Phillips Collection:

The picture represents a mighty and mysterious mountain, the top of which is veiled in clouds, but from it—the one source—come many streams of water—some are gushing torrents, some are thin threads—all flowing from the mountain of God. In the foreground of this picture are all sorts and conditions of men, pausing in reverence to hear the sound of the falling water.⁵⁴

But it was not to be. Tack had a charming idea, but it was too abstract for Nebraska's temple of democracy; it was not in harmony with the Renaissance style Goodhue had chosen for the room. It would not have survived review by the Capitol Commissioners, who understood that ordinary citizens would never make the connection between his proposed painting and the concept of religious freedom, itself a formidable abstraction.

Instead Tack drew directly on his Manitoba work and painted a group of five figures, one signifying the voice of conscience, the others

diversity of belief—an uninspired idea true to the architect's intentions but which fails to convey either the idea of religious freedom or the inscription.⁵⁵ Still, despite the dramatic difference in style between the two versions, there are similarities: little or no perspective, generalized light, flat planes of color, and parallel palettes.

Thus the balanced forces of innovation and nostalgia played out in Goodhue's capitol and Tack's murals. In taste and temperament these artists were conservatives accustomed to opulence in their personal lives. We may be confident that both were more comfortable in the company of wealthy conservatives than of moralistic Progressive politicians such as Nebraska's William Jennings Bryan and George Norris. Nevertheless, they both fit easily into Crunden's paradigm for Progressive artists. And both evolved new modes of expression during the 1910s—Goodhue earlier, Tack somewhat later.

Of the two, Goodhue was the more successful. He managed to integrate the two forces—innovation and nostalgia—in a powerful composition. He strove for functionalism; he eschewed irrelevant decoration (at least on the exterior). He was so successful in discarding the traditional Beaux-Arts vocabulary while adhering to Beaux-Arts principles that, until the International style of European architects found its way to the United States in the 1930s, some critics mistook his achievement as modernistic.

Can the artistic accomplishment of a culturally conservative architect with no apparent interest in politics be deemed Progressive? Goodhue's design for the Nebraska state capitol, like the art of Crunden's several Progressives, reflects a keen tension between nostalgia and innovation. Although his early achievements are saturated with medievalism, Goodhue was ready, by the time he won the Nebraska competition in 1920, to explore new ideas within the parameters of traditional forms. Compared to the daring and imaginative Frank Lloyd Wright (an unquestioned Progressive out of favor in the years following



FIG. 7. Tack's second and dramatically different use of the Voice of Many Waters theme appears in the central panel on the south wall of the Governor's Reception Room. The archaism of this version conforms exactly to the architect's intentions for the room, but the nexus between the text, "The Voice of God is as the Sound of Many Waters," and the human figures intended to signify freedom of religion is obscure. Photograph by Sidney Spelts, courtesy Department of Administrative Services, Building Division, Nebraska Capitol Collections.



FIG. 8. *Night, Amargosa Desert*, painted in 1935 after a visit to Death Valley in California, is a fine example of the many abstractions Tack executed in the decade following his Nebraska work. In this instance he shifted his choice of colors away from the blues that usually dominate in this series. Courtesy The Phillips Collection.

World War I), Goodhue never cut the knot of traditionalism. Nevertheless, his design brilliantly integrated new ideas with old forms; it is a monument of creativity produced at the end of the Progressive era.

Tack was not so lucky. His initial proposal to synthesize his innovative expressionism with the celebration of civic righteousness in so nostalgic a setting as the governor's suite apparently attracted no support and his idea was dropped. Instead, Tack settled for murals unlikely to offend the good citizens of Nebraska who paid the bills. Meanwhile, back in his Manhattan studio, he expressed his deepest artistic sensibilities in dozens of remarkably inventive paintings. These mysterious, enigmatic, transcendent works were intensely personal—and rarely displayed. Duncan Phillips, who never lost faith in Tack's genius, bought most of them for his collection in Washington, where they remain today.

NOTES

This essay is a revised and expanded version of a paper originally presented at the symposium "Augustus Vincent Tack: The Nebraska Connection," Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 6 November 1993. I am grateful to Leslie Furth, Robert Crunden, Robert Knoll, Daphne Deeds, and David Murphy for their critical commentary. I also thank David Murphy, Robert Haller, and William Hansen for providing photocopies of manuscript materials in the Dennison Library of Scripps College, Claremont, California and the Nebraska State Capitol Archives in Lincoln.

1. Norman Geske and Jon Nelson, "The Capitol Murals: Eight Artists, Four Decades," in Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *A Harmony of the Arts: The Nebraska State Capitol* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), pp. 81-98. The work of a ninth artist, Stephen Roberts, has been commissioned for the Memorial Chamber, which occupies the top floor of the capitol tower. These murals are scheduled for installation in 1996.

2. See the excellent review of the Tack conundrum by Elizabeth V. Chew, "Fenollosa, Dow, Tack, and Phillips: A Case for 'Subjective' Painting in America," in Leslie Furth, ed., *Augustus Vincent Tack: Landscape of the Spirit* (Washington, D.C.: Phillips Collection, 1993), pp. 67-68.

3. Robert Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1929* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), pp. 90 and 116. Cf. T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p. 159.

4. Crunden, *ibid.*, pp. 112-13, 104-05, 116-17.

5. Frederick C. Luebke, "The Capitols and Capitols of Nebraska," in Luebke, ed., *Harmony of the Arts* (note 1 above), pp. 1-13.

6. For a summary of Kimball's life and work, see David L. Batie, "Thomas Rogers Kimball: Was He a Nebraska Architect?" (master's thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1977).

7. Henry-Russell Hitchcock and William Seale, *Temples of Democracy: The State Capitols of the USA* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 272.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

9. *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* 8 (August 1920): 283. This issue also published the report of the jury, which consisted of Waddy B. Wood, James Gamble Rogers, and Willis Polk, each a nationally prominent architect at the time, pp. 301-04. See also Robert Imlay, "The Proposed Nebraska State Capitol," *Architectural Record*, July 1920, p. 75.

10. H. Keith Sawyers, "The Architectural Vision of Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue," in Luebke, ed., *Harmony of the Arts* (note 1 above), pp. 15-31. In addition to Goodhue's winning design, Sawyers includes illustrations of six others: Magonigle; Pope; Tracy and Swartwout; Davis; McKim, Mead, and White; and Cret. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-21, 26. It should be noted that Goodhue explicitly rejected Beaux-Arts classicism, though he never fully escaped its strictures. By the time of the competition in 1920, Goodhue seemed the most willing of the finalists to test the bonds of traditionalism in architecture. See also Eric Scott McCready, "The Nebraska State Capitol: Its Design, Background, and Influence," *Nebraska History* (Fall 1974): 335-44. For the context of eclecticism, see Walter C. Kidney, *The Architecture of Choice: Eclecticism in America, 1880-1930* (New York: George Braziller, 1974).

11. William H. Jordy, *American Buildings and Their Architects: Progressive and Academic Ideals at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 347-49; Sawyers, "Architectural Vision" (note 10 above), p. 17; Hitchcock and Seale, *Temples of Democracy* (note 7 above), p. 266; Lois Craig et al., *The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in United States Government Building* (Cambridge: MIT Press, n.d.), pp. 210-75.

12. Hitchcock and Seale, *Temples of Democracy* (note 7 above), pp. 204-64; Norman J. Johnston,

Washington's *Audacious State Capitol and Its Builders* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).

13. Robert Imlay's brief review in *Architectural Record*, a British journal, provides an instructive example. It appeared within weeks of the announcement of Goodhue's having won the competition. See also a letter from Dwight Perkins, a distinguished Chicago architect, to Thomas Kimball, 2 August 1920, in Records of the Nebraska Capitol Commission, 1919-1935, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, quoted in McCready, "Nebraska State Capitol" (note 10 above), p. 367. For a useful survey of American architecture in the 1920s, see David Handlin, *American Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), pp. 167-96.

14. Richard Oliver, *Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).

15. Among the many commissions their firm won were plans and additions to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Manhattan, cathedrals in Halifax (Canada) and Havana (Cuba), and campus plans for Sweet Briar College in Virginia and Rice University in Houston. For examples of Cram's crabby, anti-democratic conservatism, see his *My Life in Architecture* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1936) and his *Convictions and Controversies* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1936), portions of which are reprinted in *The Superfluous Men: Conservative Critics of American Culture, 1900-1945*, edited by Robert M. Crunden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 20-26. For Crunden's assessment of Cram, see *From Self to Society* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 164-67.

16. Oliver, *Goodhue* (note 14 above), p. 120. Cram was a prolific writer and therefore his views as a conservative are readily discerned. Goodhue published much less, but seems broader in his artistic interests.

17. *Ibid.*, 162.

18. Sawyers, "Architectural Vision" (note 10 above), p. 27; Thomas E. Talmadge, *The Story of Architecture in America*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1936), p. 261.

19. Hartley Burr Alexander, "Prairie, Pioneer, and State: Their Symbolical Interpretation," in *The Architectural Sculpture of the State Capitol at Lincoln Nebraska* (New York: Press of the American Institute of Architects, 1926), p. 2.

20. Goodhue's break with tradition did not come easily. An early study of the main elevation reveals a level of columns near the top of the tower, which was to be capped with an ineffective little cupola. Similarly, exterior sculptures are not engaged in these drawings, even though Goodhue had already employed that technique in his design

for the Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago. See *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* 8 (August 1920): 301 and 305.

21. In the words of Henry-Russell Hitchcock and William Seale, "The ecclesiastical aura of the interiors is the most obvious ever created in one of democracy's temples." Hitchcock and Seale, *Temples of Democracy* (note 7 above), p. 279.

22. Talmadge, *Architecture in America* (note 18 above), p. 259.

23. David Murphy, "Symbolism and Inscriptions: The Contribution of Hartley Burr Alexander," in Luebke, ed., *Harmony of the Arts* (note 1 above), pp. 33-47. The importance of Alexander's role in the symbology of the capitol is also revealed in Robert Haller, "The Drama of Law in the Nebraska State Capitol: Sculpture and Inscriptions," *Great Plains Quarterly* 13 (Winter 1993): 3-20.

24. Alexander's great admiration for Goodhue is amply displayed in his article cited above, note 19. See also Alexander's "Nebraska's Monumental Capitol at Lincoln," *Western Architect*, October 1923, pp. 113-16.

25. Goodhue placed Tack at the head of a list of possible painters who were acceptable to him. The list offered ten names, including H. Siddons Mowbray, one of Tack's teachers, and Edwin Blashfield, who was well known for his murals in the Library of Congress. Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue to Roy L. Cochran, Secretary of the Capitol Commission, New York, 28 January 1924, Capitol Archives, Nebraska State Capitol, Lincoln, Nebraska.

26. Bertram G. Goodhue to W. E. Hardy, New York, 25 May 1921, Records of the Nebraska Capitol Commission, RG 17, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln. The records of the commission are divided between the Nebraska State Historical Society and the archives in the capitol.

27. Alexander, "Prairie, Pioneer and State" (note 19 above), p. 2.

28. For an example of such a statement, see Leonard R. Nelson, *Nebraska's Memorial Capitol* (Lincoln: n. pub., 1931), p. 85.

29. Bertram Goodhue to H. B. Alexander, New York, 1 December 1923, Hartley Burr Alexander Papers, Ella Strong Denison Library, Scripps College, Claremont, California. Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98) was closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, though he was not a member of the original group. Bernardino Pinturicchio (1454-1513), an Umbrian painter, did frescoes in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. Benozzo Gozzoli (1420-95), who worked with Fra Angelico, is best known for his brilliant fresco "Journey of the Magi" (1459) in the Riccardi Palace, Florence.

30. [H. B. Alexander] to Bertram Goodhue, [Lincoln], 6 December 1923. Alexander Papers, Scripps

College. By this time McKelvie was no longer governor. In his place was Charles W. Bryan, the younger brother of William Jennings Bryan.

31. Augustus Vincent Tack to Goodhue, New York, 17 December 1923, Alexander Papers, Scripps College.

32. Bertram Goodhue to H. B. Alexander, New York, 18 December 1923; Revision of "Description of Proposed Decoration for the Governor's Reception Room, Nebraska State Capitol"; Augustus Vincent Tack to Goodhue, New York, 17 December 1923, with alternative historical proposal, Alexander Papers, Scripps College.

33. Bertram Goodhue to H. B. Alexander, New York, 25 January 1924, Alexander Papers, Scripps College.

34. For details regarding Goodhue's death, see Oliver, *Goodhue* (note 14 above), pp. 235 and 284, n. 56.

35. Minutes of Meeting of the Capitol Commission, 16 and 25 June 1924, 22 September 1925, and 28 June 1927, Capitol Archives, Nebraska State Capitol.

36. The murals are described effusively in Nelson, *Nebraska's Memorial Capitol* (note 28 above), pp. 85-97, and more chastely in Geske and Nelson, "The Capital Murals" (note 1 above), pp. 82-86.

37. *Lincoln State Journal*, 2 January 1928, p. 6; *Lincoln Star*, 2 January, 1928, p. 14. See also "Mural Decorations by Augustus Vincent Tack, Nebraska State Capitol," *American Magazine of Art* 19 (January 1928): 6. The governor at that time was Adam McMullen. His office prepared a five-page brochure for visitors to a reception on 1 January 1928 that he and Mrs. McMullen held for the public as the rooms were opened. Tack prepared the text, which briefly describes the murals individually. See *Governor's Suite, Nebraska State Capitol* (1 January 1928), Capitol Archives, Nebraska State Capitol.

38. What follows is based on several articles published on Tack's life and art. The most perceptive and instructive is the extended and well illustrated essay by Leslie Furth, "Augustus Vincent Tack: A Mystic's Journey to Abstraction," *Landscape of the Spirit* (note 2 above), pp. 11-116. I have also relied on John Steele, "The Protean Talent of Augustus Vincent Tack," *International Studio* 89 (April 1928): 66-69; James W. Lane, "Augustus Vincent Tack," *American Magazine of Art* 28 (December 1935): 726-33; Eleanor Green, "Augustus Vincent Tack," *Artforum* 11 (October 1972): 56-63; Herdis Bull Teilman, "Augustus Vincent Tack," *Carnegie Magazine* 52 (May 1978): 13-15; Robert Rosenblum, "Resurrecting Augustus Vincent Tack," in *The Abstractions of Augustus Vincent Tack*

(1870-1949) (New York: M. Knoedler, 1986); and J. Susan Isaacs, "Cosmic Landscapes: The Abstract Paintings of Augustus Vincent Tack," *American Art Review*, Spring 1993, pp. 140-49. Another useful publication that includes much information and many reproductions, including Tack's portrait work, is *Augustus Vincent Tack*, prepared by the American Studies Group, Hilson Gallery (Deerfield, Massachusetts: Deerfield Academy, 1962).

39. Furth, "Tack" (note 38 above), p. 15 and *passim*.

40. Some writers have suggested that Tack studied for two years in Paris, chiefly at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. Leslie Furth informed me in personal conversation that there is no documentary evidence to support this claim. See also the Tack chronology in Furth, *Landscape of the Spirit* (note 2 above), p. 117-18. It is likely, however, that during his visits to Paris, Tack studied the brilliant murals of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-98) in the Pantheon, which seem to have served in some respects as models for his Nebraska work.

41. Isaacs, "Cosmic Landscapes" (note 38 above), p. 143.

42. Thomas W. Leslie, *The Legislative Building of Manitoba* (Winnipeg: Provincial Government of Manitoba, Public Works Department, 1925) and Marilyn Baker, *Symbol in Stone: The Art and Politics of a Public Building* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1986).

43. Isaacs, "Cosmic Landscapes" (note 38 above), p. 141.

44. Green, "Tack" (note 38 above), p. 61.

45. *The Nebraska Capitol*, a thirty-two page booklet published by the Nebraska State Capitol Commission in 1926, offers on pp. 20-22 a description of what the commission expected to appear in the reception room, but does not correspond to what Tack finally painted. The architect's drawing for the room, reproduced on p. 27, suggests that Goodhue had in mind a far more intricate design than that Tack produced. The minutes of the Capitol Commission are silent on these changes.

46. [Hartley Burr Alexander] to James Lowell, 13 March 1930, Scripps College Archives.

47. Augustus Vincent Tack to R. L. Cochran, Secretary of the Capitol Commission, New York, 5 December 1924, Capitol Archives, Nebraska State Capitol.

48. Furth, "Tack" (note 38 above), p. 42.

49. "Mural Decorations by Augustus Vincent Tack, Nebraska State Capitol," *American Magazine of Art* 19 (January 1928): 10.

50. See the reproduction in Steele, "Protean Talent" (note 38 above), p. 66.

51. The Manitoba murals are reproduced in Leslie, *Legislative Building* (note 42 above) and Baker, *Symbols in Stone* (note 42 above).

52. Revelation 1:15: "Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw . . . one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; . . . his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, *and his voice was like the sound of many waters*" (Revised Standard Version, italics added). In the symbolism of Revelations, the figure represents Christ as the Son of God.

53. *Governor's Suite: Nebraska State Capitol* (note 37 above), p. 2.

54. Augustus Vincent Tack, "Description of Proposed Decoration for the Governor's Reception Room, Nebraska State Capitol," p. 2-3, Alexander Papers, Scripps College. Perhaps when Tack wrote of a throng of men of all sorts and conditions in the foreground of the panel, he was thinking of a variation on his seminal *The Crowd*, painted in 1920-22. (Reproduced in Furth, *Landscape of the Spirit* (note 2 above), p. 40).

55. There are strong similarities in concept and composition between Tack's central mural in the Manitoba legislative chamber and his Nebraska panel. Both offer similar abstractions of civic virtues such as, in the Manitoba case, "Justice," "Wisdom," and "Knowledge"; both offer five figures standing side by side, although one is a composite in the Manitoba mural. Tack even drew on the Book of Revelation in both panels: the Manitoba mural includes two representations of the Tree of Life, one on each side, an idea inspired by Rev. 22:2, "On either side of the river [was] the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit . . . ; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Revised Standard Version). According to Thomas Leslie, Tack thereby intended to symbolize the succession of generations through history, all sustained by the beneficence of justice. Leslie, *Legislative Building* (note 42 above), p. 52. For Tack's symbolism in the Nebraska panel, see Geske and Nelson, "The Capitol Murals" (note 1 above), p. 84.