

January 5, 2016

# Missoula County

## Media Release

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### Edgar S. Paxson Paintings Reinstalled in Missoula County Courthouse

After taking a four-year leave of absence during the Missoula County Courthouse renovation project, the historic Edgar S. Paxson paintings have been framed and reinstalled in the Courthouse. The iconic paintings were removed in 2012 as one of the final preparations for the renovation project. During the time of construction, the Paxson paintings were on temporary display at the Missoula Art Museum and later moved to secure storage. Jackson Contractor Group and the Missoula Art Museum went above and beyond in their efforts to make this initiative a success our community can be proud of. A time-lapse video of the installation is available on our [website](#).



In addition to being reinstalled, the murals gained dark custom frames from Burnich Frame and Molding and now have appropriate lighting, thanks to Dennis Wright with Maxus Consulting Engineers PC. After renovating and repainting the historic courtroom, local painter Amanda Bielby was able to repaint decorative numerals under each painting that correspond with interpretative literature for visitors.

“At first I was headed with a Victorian design to go with architecture in the building, but after a meeting it was obvious that the design should be a tribute to the Native American influence of the paintings,” Bielby said. “I just felt lucky to be able to get my eyes so close to the paintings and take a moment to study how they may have come together. I wondered if maybe Paxson had some of the feelings of honor and achievement that I do being able to be a part of the history in this building,” Bielby said.

The Courthouse contains eight murals by E.S. Paxson, which were finished in 1914. Edgar Samuel Paxson is probably best known for his painting of "Custer's Last Stand," finished in 1899. In 1906, he moved his studio to Missoula from Butte and in 1912 began a group of murals depicting early Montana history.

“I was able to work on the murals’ conservation reviews, documentation and research efforts during the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial,” Missoula Art Museum’s Registrar, Jennifer Reifsneider said. “Reframing the Paxson murals – literally and figuratively – always makes me feel part of a unique community and proud of how we collaborate and engage with our visual and cultural histories.”

As an added and wonderful surprise, the underpaintings were uncovered during the renovation process. According to the Missoula Art Museum, the underpaintings, now hung in the north stairwell between the second and third floors of the Courthouse, depict wagon trains, an infrequent subject but in line with Paxson’s depictions of Indian trails and people in the landscape. While the draftsmanship is strong, the coloration is only blocked in, using the characteristic light, pastel colors that Paxson used as underpaint.

Paxson’s large-scale paintings depict in a grandiose manner some of the historic events that occurred in the area: Father Ravalli arriving at Fort Owen, the signing of the Hellgate Treaty, the Salish people leaving the Bitterroot Valley for the Flathead Reservation, three paintings featuring the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The paintings capture the spirit of the time, a nostalgic yearning for the bygone days of the heroic west, rendered with Paxson’s typical painstaking attention to detail of costume and accoutrement.

This is not the first time that the Missoula County Commission has invested in the murals. In 1980, Commissioners Wilfred V. Thibodeau, Barbara Evans and Joseph Boyer signed a re-dedication proclamation resolving that the week of April 21 – 25 would be observed as E.S. Paxson week, and April 25, Paxson’s birthday, would be recognized as Paxson Painting Appreciation and Dedication Day. A copy of the resolution is attached with this email.

More information about each of the eight depictions and Paxson’s biographical account from the Missoula Art Museum is included.

We encourage members of the media and the public to visit the Courthouse to view the installation.