

THE PEOPLE'S ART

American history loves its heroes, emphasis on the male deliberate. We all grew up learning the masculine, Eurocentric take on momentous events, with occasional mentions of women and people of color to keep the school board happy. But we still have a long way to go, something I realized when our third-grader came home with a biography espousing the heroic feats of the “discoverer” of America, Christopher Columbus.

While some strides have been made toward revealing that Columbus actually brought genocide and slavery to these shores, the fact that Americans still celebrate Columbus Day discourages. The growing acceptance of Columbus as a conqueror—and many other alternative takes on American history—can be traced to the 1980 publication of Howard Zinn’s groundbreaking, alternative take on America’s past, *A People’s History of the United States 1492-Present* (Harper Collins).



Palette-pleasing: Artist Patrick Fiore works in his Florida studio (the painting “Haudenosaunee” stands at the center). Pictured below is one of the gallery walls at ArtRage showing the arrangement of nine of Fiore’s paintings.

Zinn’s book formed the inspiration for the current must-see exhibit at ArtRage Gallery: *Significant Souls*, paintings by Patrick Fiore, who grew up in Utica, attended Syracuse University College of Visual and Performing Arts and now teaches illustration at Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Fla. “I had been aware of Howard Zinn,” Fiore says. “I was aware of the voices from the left and I came up with the idea that I would like to propose this project to him.”

So Fiore attended a lecture by Zinn at the University of South Florida, asking beforehand if he could hang his paintings in the lobby outside the lecture hall. “Just putting myself out there—it’s how I’ve done things in the past,” he says with a shrug. “I told him about my work through email, and after the lecture he spent 40 minutes with me and I proposed the project and he was very supportive.”

The project comprises 34 paintings, some larger than others, currently hanging at ArtRage, 505 Hawley Ave. By March 8, prints of four of those paintings will grace four individual rooms inside the Matilda Joslyn Gage Center, 210 E. Genesee St. It’s a novel collaboration between two venues concerned with social justice, but attracting and serving entirely different populations. Thanks to a \$20,000 grant from the Initiative to Develop and Engage Audiences (IDEAS) Collaborative, it’s a first in Syracuse.

The IDEAS Collaborative involves a half-dozen foundations that have already funded \$100,000 in arts-related projects within Onondaga County. The six funding groups are the Allyn Foundation, Central New York Community Foundation, Gifford Foundation, Dorothy and Marshall M. Reisman Foundation, John Ben Snow Foundation and the Trust for Cultural Resources of Onondaga County.

Heidi Holtz, Gifford Foundation director of research and projects, says the idea came out of conversations in 2010 about how to help local arts groups out of the economic downturn and hone what those groups mean when they say community engagement. “What would happen if we built up enough of these groups’ audiences to make them more sustainable,” Holtz reports, “so they have continuing financial support while not constantly putting fires out?”

After focus group meetings, consulting from Surale Phillips, president of Decision Support Partners Inc., out of Bozeman, Mont., and a lot of brain-stretching thinking from 43 arts organizations, the IDEAS Collaborative released its first \$80,000 in grant funds in 2012. *Significant Souls* is one beneficiary, and it is hoped ArtRage and the Gage Center will benefit for some time hence.

“ArtRage tends to hit an urban, minority population,” says Patricia Company, associate director of operations at the Gage Foundation, “while we have a suburban, middle- and upper-class population.”

Adds Rose Viviano, director of ArtRage, “We both focus on social justice issues, so a collaboration between our two venues made sense, and starting the collaboration with Patrick’s work made even more sense.”



Michael Davis Photo



Michael Davis Photos

Large and In Charge

The open space at ArtRage lends itself to the large paintings Fiore and Viviano decided upon for this exhibit. Many of the paintings are grouped thematically, while others create a pleasing arrangement on the expansive, white walls. "The show was curated by myself and Rose," Fiore says. "We had discussions about how the exhibit is displayed, some is content-based and some is more aesthetic, depending upon size, shape and relationships that happen when you move things around."

The paintings are also quite detailed, so take your time with each one. A life-size painting of Farouk, one of Fiore's students, requires some time to both examine the artwork and work through the cynical poem Fiore painted on top of the image in "User Friendly Fire," his response to 9/11: "Can-Do Country, Patriots All/ We Must Defend the Shopping Mall."

"Strange Loot" presents a slave-based take on the Pieta, with a collapsed male figure being cradled by a woman, both African American and set, fittingly, in a cotton field. A girl wearing a burka stands next to a message: "Justice is not/Just U.S."

"Plastics" highlights white strips that normally secure garbage bags, being used instead to bind wrists and keep in place a hood over a human head. The restraints are made of plastic, which depends on oil for its manufacturing, and we all know the sordid history of the United States' addiction to oil.

The familiar historical duo of "Sacco & Vanzetti"—they form a mosaic on the side of an academic building on the Syracuse University Quad—sits for the painter in "Blood, White and Blue," manacles subtly visible. "Korporate Klan" is rather jarring, with white-masked, clown-like figures wearing white dunce caps; creepy would best describe this one.

A direct shout-out to Zinn and his writings comes in the form of "Removal," a large painting of many faces embarking on the Trail of Tears, the forced relocation and movement of Native American nations from southeastern parts of the United States following the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The exodus included many members of the Cherokee, Muscogee, Seminole, Chickasaw and Choctaw nations in the United States from their homelands to Indian Territory, eastern sections of the present-day Oklahoma. Remember this atrocity when you are angry about Syrians being forced into Turkey or the Lost Boys; Americans aren't so innocent as many history books would have us believe.

A clever idea asks visitors to write on Post-it notes "What is YOUR History?" Mine: "Polish paternal grandparents and Cherokee maternal great-grandmother."

There is so much alternative history here to absorb, so many wrongs that need to be righted, so few rational explanations for a lot of the behavior chronicled in *Significant Souls*, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't try to sort them out. Except for actual people, Central New York's own women's rights pioneer Matilda Joslyn Gage, suspected anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, and Cuban poet Jose Marti, Fiore deliberately chose to paint ordinary, generic subjects.

"The idea, as in Howard Zinn's book, is more to represent symbolically the events through everyday action by people who actually became important even though they aren't recognized as such," Fiore, 53, explains. "These are opportunities to bring forward some people whose actions were not so much planned but rather circumstantial."

Indeed, Gage's history is one of being marginalized, written out of early women's rights activities by her one-time colleagues and eventual rivals Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. So Fiore painted Gage as a somber figure, hair pulled back, standing in front of an American flag.

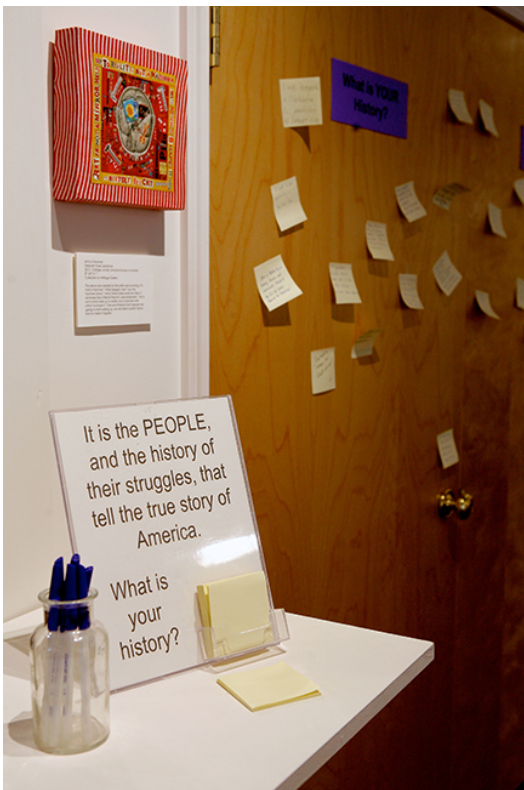
"Patrick Fiore came to our awareness because someone had suggested he paint Gage," says Company, "someone history has written out, which resonates with Zinn's work. So he came for a visit, showed us some of his work and talked about how he'd love to show it here in Syracuse. Our venue, in Fayetteville, is too small to show a significant portion of his work. When we met with Patrick we immediately thought of ArtRage: It's in the city, it's focused on social justice issues and it has enough space."

Around the same time the IDEAS Collaborative was emerging, so with help from Olive Sephuma of the Central New York Community Foundation, Kim McCoy from ArtRage and Company worked on writing the grant. Gage Center executive director Sally Roesch Wagner and Rose Viviano did the editing, and all four women worked on the budgets. The \$20,000 grant, split equally between the two venues, allowed Fiore to bring his artwork here, and for him to appear at both places at the beginning and the end of the exhibit, as well as to permanently

install four prints at the Gage Center.

An Engaging Figure

When this writer first wrote about the Gage house in 2000, its progress as an interpretive center about the feminist, who was born in Cicero, raised her family in Fayetteville and saw her daughter Maud married to L. Frank Baum (yes, *that* L. Frank Baum), was spotty at best. It was Wagner's domicile at the time, she was using a side porch as a bedroom, and a small cabinet in the main room held the Gage artifacts she had collected thus far. The front parlor, where Baum and Maud Gage were married, received the initial attention, and it made for a delightful spot for teas, guest speakers and small receptions.



Note to self: A portion of the Significant Souls exhibit asks visitors to post their heritage, or their history, to comprise a collective whole.

Michael Davis Photo



It is now dubbed the Oz Family Parlor, and is one of six themed rooms inside the center, which is now open to visitors; Wagner lives nearby. The parlor and an accompanying Local History Room are too small for the large signed prints the Gage Center is purchasing with its share of the grant money.

But the remaining four rooms are plenty large, and each will host the unveiling of a painting germane to that room's theme on four alternating Sundays. On Jan. 27, "Haudenosaunee," was unveiled in the room bearing the same name. On Feb. 10 from 3 to 5 p.m., the Religious Freedom Room will receive the aforementioned "User Friendly Fire." On Feb. 24, 3 to 5 p.m., "Utica Rescue," a lesser-known but similar event to Syracuse's Jerry Rescue, will be hung in the Underground Railroad Room. And on March 8, International Women's Day, from 6 to 8 p.m., the portrait of Gage will be unveiled. Each event will feature guest speakers and they are all free.

On Thursday, Feb. 21, 7 p.m., ArtRage will present *The People Speak*, a film performance of Zinn's original book, while on Thursday, March 7, 7 p.m., Fiore will be in attendance to preside over an artist talk and close out the exhibit.

Before the exhibit closes, however, there will be two more points of collaboration. On Feb. 21, a group will be carpooling from the Gage Center for dinner at Sparky Town, 324 Burnet

Ave., before the showing of the film. And then on Feb. 24, a group will travel from ArtRage to Fayetteville for the Underground Railroad program.

It's all a culmination of that first collaboration between Fiore and Zinn. Fiore's work made an impression upon Zinn, just as Zinn's did on Fiore. They kept in touch after that initial meeting in Florida in 2004 and until Zinn's death in early 2010. For *Significant Souls*, Zinn wrote this about Fiore:

"When he approached me with his idea, I was dubious, understanding that it was a gigantic undertaking. But when he showed me his first few paintings I saw that he had the talent, the energy, the determination and, most of all, the powerful commitment to social justice to pursue his project to the end. What attracts me most to his work is his profound understanding of the connection between art and social struggle. To join my work in history with his paintings is a striking expression of that connection."

And Fiore's being a Central New Yorker helped him place the abolition and women's rights struggles into a local context that many outsiders can't understand. "My emphasis within the project and research throughout New York state on the Underground Railroad, abolitionists, Haudenosaunee, women's rights and labor rights notes the rich heritage, history and wealth of resources available in Central New York," Fiore says.

"I grew up playing in the fields, around the hills and forests, imagining the lives of the indigenous people within the landscape, and continue that interest and passion for the diversity of cultures and rich history held by the region. I plan to remain active in the region and look to returning as often as possible to promote the importance and value of the visual and performing arts for education and economic development."

As this project proves, the IDEAS Collaborative is working.

Significant Souls continues at ArtRage Gallery, 505 Hawley Ave., through March 9. Viewing hours are

Wednesdays to Fridays, 2 to 7 p.m.; Saturdays, noon to 4 p.m. Call 218-5711 or visit artragegallery.org. Learn the people's history of Central New York—if you wait until after March 8, you will see all the prints—at the Gage Foundation, 210 E. Genesee St. The public is invited to take self-guided tours. Call 637-9511 or visit matildajoslyngage.org.