

## Iowa's Beautiful State House and Its Artistic Interior Decorations

With Especial Reference to the Work that Has Been Done Under the Direction of the State Capitol Commission in Expending the Appropriation of the Last Legislature.



"WESTWARD"—THE TEN-THOUSAND-DOLLAR BLASHFIELD PAINTING AT THE HEAD OF THE GRAND STAIRWAY IN THE IOWA STATE CAPITOL BUILDING AT DES MOINES.—From a Photo by the Inslee Deck Company of New York; Copyright, 1905, by Edwin H. Blashfield.

UNTIL the instructions of the Twenty-ninth General Assembly of Iowa were carried out, the corridors and rotunda of the Iowa state capitol building, the part most seen by the visitor, were plain undecorated walls. In the cove above the grand staircase an attempt at decorative art had been made and some Indian figures were there presented with some other paintings. A legend is retained about the state house that the painter who did the work received \$1.50 a day, and a good judge of art would say that he earned no more. In the rotunda of the building on the first floor there were four niches. Two of these were empty except for some benches piled in them. The other two were boarded up and were used by the janitors as closets. They were eyesores to everyone who saw them. Down through the long corridors absolutely nothing existed to break the monotony of the architectural lines. The wide corridor of the entrance presented only white walls and with the massive arches overhead gave one more or less the impression of being in a basement where the supports of the structure are allowed to stand out in all prominence.

### Office Rooms Painted.

The office rooms of the state house have been adorned with mural decorations for years. The work for the most part was satisfactory. The corridors, rotunda and spaces about the building were the most glaringly deficient, so the legislature gave the capitol commission an appropriation and ordered that the state house corridors be decorated, and gave the commission authority to select the best artists of the country to paint pictures to be hung in suitable places. One such painting was ordered to be placed in a panel fourteen by thirty-eight feet, just above the grand staircase, and for this an appropriation of \$10,000 was made. An appropriation of the same amount was made for six panels of smaller size above the gallery which overlooks the grand staircase. An appropriation of \$8,000 was made for the eight lunettes in the rotunda. Many other spaces suitable for paintings still remain and it is the intention of the legislature to make additional appropriations for paintings for these spaces in time.

### Effect Sought in Decoration.

In decorating the walls of the building the object sought was to cover up the harsh architectural lines. Instead of greeting the visitor on entering the state house with a barrenness, it was sought to so decorate the walls that a feeling of ease and comfort would greet one. The Iowa state capitol has been occupied for about twenty years, and one point to be avoided was that the paintings should not present such a newness and freshness that the building would look like an old building painted over to make it look new. The painting must be harmonious and Mr. Garnsey, who did the decorative work, has succeeded admirably in the judgment of the best critics. Olives, old rose and sombre colors predominate in the decorative work. The bell of the dome is covered with gold leaf and above it a deep blue to give a background for the gold. From the bell of the dome to the first floor is 163 feet, and the skill of the artist in decorating that enormous hole was no small task. It has been accomplished and the blending of the colors from top to bottom is pleasing. The architectural lines here, too, were the most difficult to cover up. This has been accomplished largely by a harmony of colors.

The ceiling of the main east and west corridors of the first floor has been decorated to give the soft Mosaic effect, and has been done with great success. The olives and old rose colors of the walls are carried into the ceiling Mosaics and give the same pleasing effect as though the decorations had always been there from the time the building was first erected. The decorations seem to be a very part of the building. As one comes from the main corridor to the rotunda he no longer sees the four niches which were formerly mere cubby holes. They are now inclosed and are the receptacles of the battle flags carried by the Iowa regiments during the Civil war. The cases are sealed with a plate glass, covering the opening, and even the old battle flags seem to blend nicely with the other decorations.

### Problems for the Painter.

The narrow corridors leading to the north and south were formerly dark and gloomy because barren. Artist Garnsey has accomplished wonders here by introducing the Pompeian decorations. Bright Pompeian red has been used which, given an old effect under the skillful work of the artist, enlivens the dark corridors and gives a very pleasing effect.

The same colors and effect in the main corridor is carried into the east corridor. Perhaps the greatest skill of the artist was made necessary by the fact that the building is a museum of marble. One of the commissioners who built the state house was an authority on marble. He wished to display his learning on that subject and did so by introducing marble from every quarter of the globe. It is asserted that there was no marble of known fame and prominence up to the time of the completion of the building that was not used. The wainscoting of the office rooms as well as of the corridors is made up of an almost endless variety. Soon after the state house was completed a pamphlet was printed which was a guide to the marble used in the finishing work and the pamphlet, which was devoted entirely to that subject, was of considerable size. The marble is of every color of the rainbow and some besides, and to put colors on the walls that would harmonize with all this color in the marble and still give a soft and pleasing effect was the chief task of the artist. The grand staircase in the east corridor is made of marble entirely, and the glare of color in that end of the building is worse than anywhere else.

Just above the grand staircase is the painting by E. H. Blashfield of New York. It was the contention of Senator A. B. Funk,

chairman of the capitol commission, that the only thing that could be done in getting a great painting was to select a great artist, give him a commission and leave him to his own devices. This plan was followed. It has been the wish and expectation to have work by nearly if not all of the great artists of this time. The panel above the grand staircase is fourteen feet high by thirty-eight feet long. It is considered the most conspicuous place and the best place for a great painting that the state house affords. E. H. Blashfield was selected to paint the picture for this space.

### Where Blashfield's Painting Hangs.

It was the first desire of the capitol commission and of nearly everyone else that this painting should in a way at least be typical of the west and should be a preservation in art of the growth and development of a great state from a prairie wilderness. It was realized that an artist must be given a free rein, that art cannot be controlled as in carpenter work, and that sometimes the best

artists, failing to catch the inspiration, will fall short of expectations. Consequently when Blashfield was commissioned to paint the picture for which the state had appropriated \$10,000 the commission offered up some silent prayers that he would be inspired to paint a masterpiece.

### Spirit of the Painting.

The picture is entitled "Westward." The most conspicuous figure in the painting is a great prairie schooner of the pioneer days, which is moving from the right to the left of the picture. In the front of the schooner sit two women and a child and drawing the schooner are two yoke of oxen. Men and women and children such as accompanied such trains in the pioneer days follow on either side of the oxen. Above the oxen and in front of the prairie schooner are mythical figures. One carries the seal of the state of Iowa. Two others carry a basket of seeds which they distribute. Back of the prairie schooner come two other mythical figures, one carrying a

miniature locomotive and the other a miniature dynamo. Towards the right of the picture and near the rear of the prairie schooner is a corn field with watermelons and other signs of civilization and a man on horseback and three others on foot. Thus from the ox team at the left of the picture in the lead to the corn field and the figures carrying the locomotive and dynamo at the extreme right there is represented the progress of civilization, the "westward" trend of civilization and the reclaiming of the virgin soil to cultivation and civilization.

### Looked Upon as a Masterpiece.

Great paintings are recognized as such only after they have been exhibited long enough for the public to become educated up to their merits. It is the belief of the members of the capitol commission that they have what they hoped for—a masterpiece—and there is a belief that the painting will be recognized as such by the public as soon as it has had the opportunity to study the work, for the first view is never as appreciative as the one-hundredth in the case of a great painting. It is certainly true with the Blashfield painting that there is a rare harmony of color and balance to the painting. It is suited to the building and the place in which it is hung and adds very greatly to the beautiful architecture of the state capitol.

### Decoration in Large Chambers.

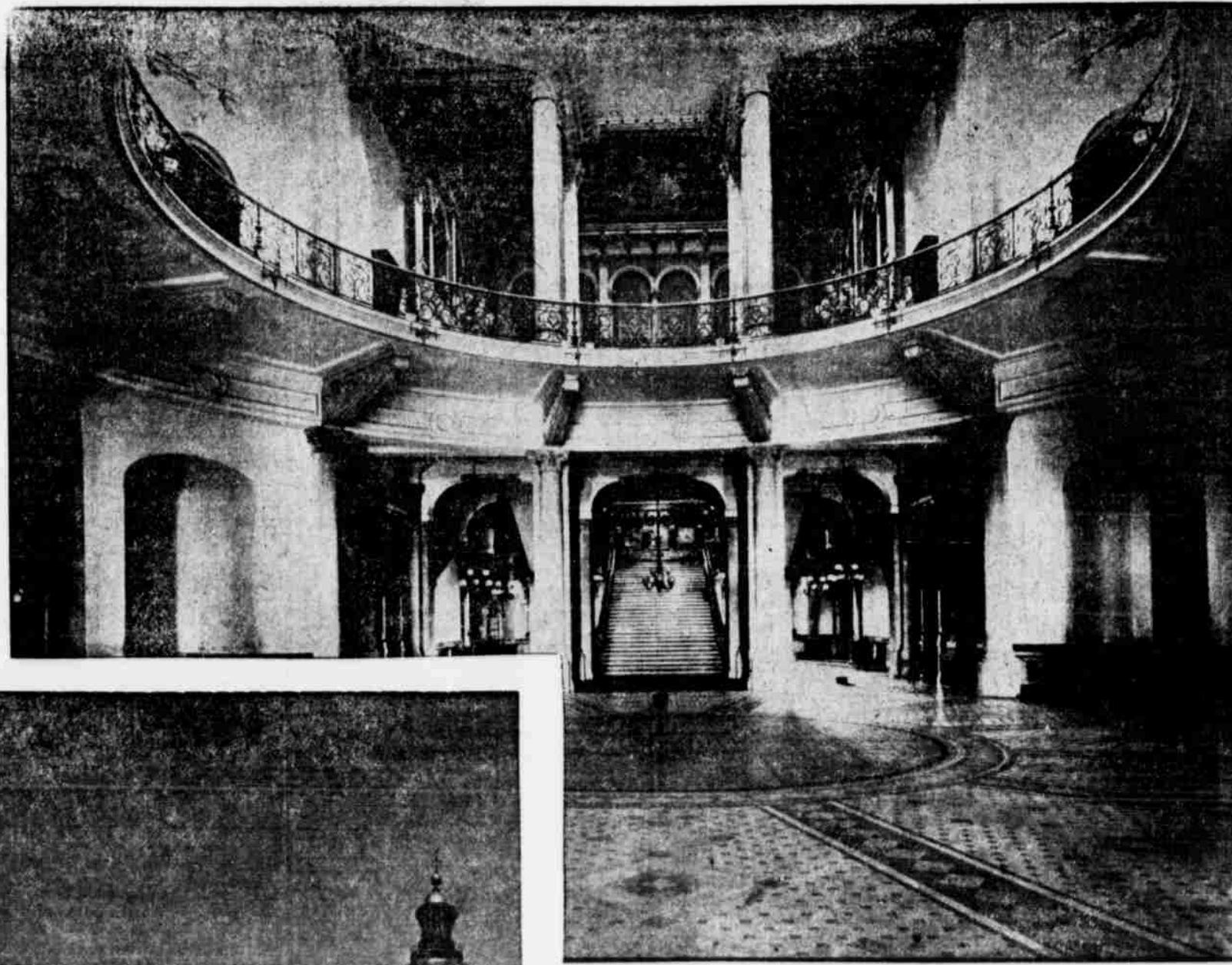
The supreme court room and the hall of the house of representatives were both badly damaged by fire two years ago, and decorating has taken place here. The house chamber has been rebuilt, it might almost be said. The fire so damaged that part of the building that the entire interior of the room is now new. The ceiling and walls and all the furnishings are new, and as it is today, on the eve of the convening of the legislature, the house chamber is more beautiful than it ever was before. The supreme court room was merely smoked a little and soiled with water, and all that has been done there was to redecorate the walls, which has been done very artistically. But in the house the scagliola columns have been replaced with columns of a lighter color. The ceiling is far more beautiful than the old one and the decorations and all are lighter and more modern. Hundreds of incandescent electric lights will illuminate the room. The chandeliers in the new furnishings are made of incandescent lights covered with an inverted bell of small pieces of cut glass, and when the lights are on the effect is very pleasing and very dazzling.

### Story of Its Construction

Iowa people are proud of their state house. They are proud of the fact that it was built by a commission and that after seventeen years, after a most rigid investigation, the commission was found to be off in its accounts only \$3.77. In reality four separate commissions have conducted the work of erecting and completing the Iowa capitol building and the fourth is now only completing the building, the foundation for which was first laid in 1871. The first commission consisted of the governor, who was made ex-officio president of the board, and eight members selected by the house and senate. They were to receive \$5 a day for the actual time they put in and also their actual traveling expenses. The men who really built the state house were Maturin L. Fisher, R. S. Finkbine and Peter A. Dey, the last named being the only one now living.

Under the provision that the rate of taxation could not be increased the erection of the state house was a slow process, and seventeen years later, when the legislature suddenly abolished the commission, though the building was occupied by the state officials, it was not completed. The governor was given a sum of money to complete the building and he made such temporary arrangements as were necessary and the building remained in much that condition till the twenty-eighth general assembly in 1900 created the capitol improvement commission and charged it with making an investigation of the building with a view to completing it. This commission consisted of Peter A. Dey, a member of the first commission; Prof. C. A. Cunningham of this city and Henry S. Josselyn. This commission did considerable work and the next legislature provided for the commission, now putting on the finishing touches.

The original intention of the legislature was that the capitol should cost not to exceed \$1,500,000. Up to 1887 the General Assembly had appropriated at different times and there had been expended on the state house \$2,876,300. Since then the legislature has appropriated over a quarter of a million and the cost of the completed building will be at least \$3,250,000.



MAIN FLOOR IN THE ROTUNDA OF THE IOWA CAPITOL, SHOWING THE GRAND MARBLE STAIRWAY, AT THE HEAD OF WHICH THE BLASHFIELD PAINTING WILL HANG. WEST FRONT OF THE IOWA STATE HOUSE, THE MOST HANDSOME PUBLIC BUILDING IN ALL THE WEST AND THE PRIDE OF ALL PATRIOTIC HAWKEYES.