Inspired by the expansive Panthéon de la Guerre mural completed by French artists 100 years ago to memorialize World War I, the Minnesota Historical Society commissioned Minneapolis artist David Geister to paint a 30-foot mural depicting individual Americans who helped shape, or were shaped by, the war and who had a hand in the making of modern America. The mural complements the WW1 America exhibit on view at the Minnesota History Center through November 11, 2017.

**THEN**

According to art historian Mark Levitch, the Panthéon de la Guerre was the most ambitious World War I memorial. The effort, led by Auguste François-Marie Gorguet and Pierre Carrier-Belleuse, began in September 1914 and was completed in October 1918. Stretching more than 400 feet in length and depicting nearly 6,000 allied troops, the completed work was viewed by millions of French citizens in a specially constructed building in Paris. In 1927 some US businessmen purchased the panorama and transported it to the United States to be displayed—more as spectacle than somber remembrance—on a 13-year tour to Chicago, Cleveland, New York, San Francisco, and Washington, DC.

The Great Depression and a second world war overshadowed the work of Gorguet and Carrier-Belleuse. The artwork was crated and abandoned on a Baltimore loading dock for more than a dozen years. It was not until 1956 that Daniel MacMorris, a Kansas City artist and World War I veteran, secured the deteriorating Panthéon for the Liberty Memorial in Kansas.
City, Missouri. MacMorris painstakingly reconfigured some sections, while scrapping others, to make the mural fit the memorial walls and to reflect the Cold War mindset of the era. His work is now permanently installed at the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City. What remains is a compelling illustration of how stories and times change.

**NOW**

David Geister, a Marine Corps veteran, is an artist and illustrator who worked at Historic Fort Snelling in the 1970s. More recently, he has painted portraits of Dred and Harriet Scott as well as a sweeping depiction of Minnesotans on the second day at the Battle of Gettysburg and has illustrated 20 picture books, including *Storm’s Coming* by Margi Preus (MNHS Press). In April 2017 he started the process of painting, in public view, 100 Americans across three canvas panels, each measuring 10 feet wide by 8 feet high. What resulted were innumerable conversations with History Center guests about the process of painting and the storied individuals portrayed. With guidance from Geister, some guests even added their own brushstrokes to this historic undertaking.

Oftentimes, the closer one looks the more complexities and contradictions emerge. One hundred years ago, the French artists had to rework their nearly complete composition to account for the late entry of the Americans into what was then known as the Great War. The Minnesota Historical Society’s WW1 America exhibit was created to coincide with the centennial anniversary of the US declaration of war with Germany. The turbulent time—labor strikes, racial violence, suffrage struggles—within the United States was the focus. It was also the starting point in generating a long list of individuals from this era who arguably had a hand in making modern America. This cohort was the basis for those 100 individuals depicted in the mural. Winnowing down this list to just 100 names was excruciating but essential, given the limited time and space to complete the mural. The goal was not to come up with a definitive list; rather, an attempt at a representative one that did not merely depict heroes. The list included social activists and suffragists alongside future generals and present and future presidents; actors, authors, entertainers, and educators; scientists; and sports figures. Some are considered heroes, others villains; figures such as Woodrow Wilson and Henry Ford contained aspects of both. People, like history, are full of contradictions. Many
prominent names did not make the list because they were born too early or too late to be included in the World War I generation.

Viewing these 100 Americans standing side by side can stimulate conversations about our world today. How much influence have these individuals had in making modern America? Who is not there that should be? How might a similar effort 100 years from now look different than today? Art, like history, can be a messy process with lessons learned along the way.

MNHS is in talks with the education department of the National World War I Museum and Memorial about a long-term loan of the WW1 America Mural.

—Randal Dietrich, executive director, Minnesota Military Museum, and former MNHS WW1 specialist

FACING PAGE: WW1 mural in progress. RIGHT: Artist David Geister at work. (BOTH PHOTOS BY DOUG OHMAN)

Mural Roster

1. The War
   - Jack Johnson
   - Anne Tracy Morgan
   - Walt Lippmann
   - George Patton
   - Christy Mathewson
   - Anna Coleman Ladd
   - Laurence Stallings
   - Edwin Hubble
   - John McCloy
   - José de la Luz Sáenz
   - Tokutaro Slocum
   - Frederick Jones
   - James Reese Europe
   - Joseph Oklahombi
   - George Cushing
   - Oswald Robertson
   - John Pershing
   - George C. Marshall
   - Harry Truman
   - Douglas MacArthur

2. The Political Front
   - James Weldon Johnson
   - Clarence Darrow
   - William Randolph Hearst
   - William Jennings Bryan
   - Nellie Tayloe Ross
   - Mary Church Terrell
   - Frances Perkins

3. The Home Front
   - Charles Eastman
   - Zitkala-Sa
   - Zora Neale Hurston
   - Jovita Idar
   - Claude McKay
   - Margaret Sanger
   - Ida B. Wells
   - Georgia O’Keeffe
   - Oscar Micheaux
   - Madam C. J. Walker
   - Bessie Smith
   - Duke Ellington
   - Mary McLeod Bethune
   - Owen Young
   - William Boeing
   - Henry Ford
   - Albert Einstein
   - Babe Ruth
   - Jim Thorpe
   - Robert Goddard
   - George Washington Carver
   - Charles “Chief” Bender
   - Andrew “Rube” Foster
   - Anna Wessels Williams
   - Robert Yerkes
   - Grace Humiston
   - Charles A. Lindbergh
   - Elijah Muhammad
   - Al Capone
   - Aimee Semple McPherson

Biographies of the 100 Americans portrayed on the mural may be found at www.mnhs.org/ww1americamural

WW1 AMERICA

THROUGH NOV. 11, 2017

MINNESOTA HISTORY CENTER

MNHS.ORG/WW1AMERICA

FALL 2017
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