

Native leaders: BC legislature's paintings of bare-breasted Aboriginal women offensive

VICTORIA (CP) _ Depression-era paintings of bare-breasted aboriginal women on display at British Columbia's legislature are demeaning and must be removed, say aboriginal leaders.

"These paintings of bare-breasted aboriginal women and of aboriginal persons in subservient positions are, we are sure you will understand, highly offensive, demeaning and degrading to First Nations people in the province," says a June 23 letter to Andrew Petter, B.C.'s Attorney General and minister responsible for human rights.

Aboriginal leaders met with Petter last week and discussed the removal of the artwork, part of a huge piece displayed in a prominent place in the rotunda of the legislature.

"We therefore feel that these paintings should be removed as soon as possible," said the letter.

"We would appreciate an early response to

our concerns, and expect one by no later than July 31, 2000."

The letter is signed by Grand Chief Ed John, Kathryn Teneese and Bill Wilson, officials of the First Nations Summit, the largest aboriginal organization in the province.

The painting, signed by artist Geo. Southwell, is part of a series of paintings in a mural hanging in the lower rotunda of the historic building. Thousands of tourists from around the world visit each year.

The mural depicts interaction between early European colonialists and B.C. aboriginals during the mid 1800s, including treaty signings, traditional greetings and trading meetings.

One shows several bare-breasted aboriginal women carrying cedar-woven baskets of salmon as aboriginal men and European settlers unload a nearby ship.

John said in an interview aboriginal elders, women and youth have told his group they want the painting removed.

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"Put up something historically accurate, not something that is glorifying the colonial past of the province," he said.

Petter said he will bring the concerns of the aboriginal

leaders to the people who operate the building.

"The argument that they make by this is both demeaning and contrary to the historical practice," he said.

"Obviously that is part of the argument that I'll take

forward and act on."

Officials at the legislature could not be reached for comment, but employees who did not want to be quoted said the issue has come up several times in the last 20 years.

"It's a very legitimate issue, obviously. Depictions of people and their cultural representation within a government building are important. They send a message," Petter said.

He would not reveal if he was prepared to remove the paintings or paint over the offending scenes.

Aboriginal Minister Dale Lovick said the paintings may be historically inaccurate and deplorable, but should not be removed from the legislature.

He suggested the paintings could be used as examples of how aboriginal people were depicted in the past. But John disagreed.

"What should we do then, put up swastikas in the rotunda to remind us of the past?"