Christopher Columbus has always had a prominent place in the American imagination, at times even personifying America. In 1892, the 400th anniversary of his first voyage to the Caribbean, Columbus was popularly hailed as the “first” American, and Congress honored the “discoverer of the New World” in 1893 by authorizing a World’s Fair in Chicago. Over the next century, Americans came to understand Columbus and themselves differently, as he has been widely condemned for the “conquest” of the Americas, with some arguing that he was responsible for genocide.

These murals, completed during the years of 1882-84, survive as that period’s interpretation of the historical events they depict. We, in our turn, have the responsibility to interpret both the historical events and the murals themselves from the perspective of our own time, with our knowledge and our moral commitments. The University encourages you to keep this responsibility in mind as you view and reflect on these murals.

This brochure is intended to aid your reflection by helping you understand these works of art, and the period and perspective that produced them.
As prominent as Columbus has been in the American imagination, he has played an even more crucial and eventually conflicted role for American Catholics. The Italian artist Luigi Gregori painted these murals from 1882 to 1884. Catholics then were trying to define themselves as “real” Americans, and working to no longer be considered suspicious immigrants or second-class citizens. Columbus, a Catholic, personified America. By claiming Columbus, American Catholics could claim their country. And Notre Dame has been living with related tensions ever since — “God, Country, Notre Dame” speaks to both the University’s aspirations and the tensions that underscore them.

Such tensions should be kept in mind while viewing these murals. The images can be troubling, especially their portrayal of Native Americans. Such depictions conflict with the vision of the dignity of the human person championed by the Catholic Church. Yet, these murals also exist as cultural artifacts that speak to the past hopes of European Catholic immigrants who wanted to carve out a niche in an often hostile society. While these images speak to those hopes, they do so while failing to account for the suffering of Native Americans. We encourage you to consider what these paintings meant to 19th-century Americans of European origin and what they mean to us today. As a community of scholars, Notre Dame has an obligation to ensure that later generations can bring their own ways of seeing the world to the murals’ tensions. Every university, especially a Catholic university, must draw forth “both the new and the old” (Matthew 13:52).

In the 19th century, new Catholic immigrants came to see Christopher Columbus as a hero—and a Catholic hero most importantly. In the midst of serious anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States at the time, Columbus became a symbol for American Catholics who wished to argue that Catholics had participated in the very founding of the nation and had a meaningful role to play. In the following years, American Catholics would advocate sainthood for Columbus and the creation of a national holiday in his honor. Additionally, an Irish Catholic priest in New Haven, Connecticut, would found the principal Catholic fraternal men’s association in the United States and call it the Knights of Columbus. It is therefore not surprising that when the new Main Building at Notre Dame was being designed, Columbus and the voyage of 1492 would have been chosen as a theme for its entrance hall.
When Father Edward Sorin brought Vatican portrait artist Luigi Gregori to the United States in 1874, his intent was that Gregori would adorn the faces of the University’s various buildings with art that would inspire, uplift and educate. It had to be beautiful. It had to be didactically Catholic. Gregori did not disappoint Father Sorin. When Gregori’s initial project, 14 small stations of the cross for Sacred Heart Church (now the Basilica of the Sacred Heart), was completed, he immediately embarked on creating the frescoes and murals for the church. While Gregori was working on the artwork for Sacred Heart, the University experienced its greatest calamity: the Main Building fire of 1879. When a marathon rebuilding campaign raised a replacement structure from the fire’s ashes, its public hallways must have presented themselves to both University officials and the artist-in-residence as appealing empty canvases—crying out to be adorned with images consonant with the mission of an American Catholic educational institution.

Gregori, the portrait painter, was either given or assumed the task of celebrating the accomplishments, and trials, of a celebrated figure who arguably could be called the first American—first, that is, from a European perspective. That distinction is important for understanding Gregori’s presentation of Columbian history. In the period immediately preceding the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ “discovery” of the Americas, the Italian man, Christoforo Columbo, was something of a civil saint. Criticism of his treatment of the Native American population would await subsequent generations. Even the mutinies of his crew, seen now by some historians as reasonable responses of men pushed to the brink by a captain’s tyrannical behavior, were viewed in the 1880s as evidence of the trials all martyrs must suffer while engaged in God’s work.
FORM EQUALS CONTENT IN LUIGI GREGORI’S MURALS

When viewing Luigi Gregori’s Christopher Columbus murals, one should note that Gregori began working at Notre Dame in 1874, the same year the Impressionists began exhibiting as a group. While we normally associate art made at the dawn of the 20th century with formal innovation and the rejection of idealistic interpretation, it is clear that Gregori instead worked in the conventions of an older artistic milieu. Indeed, by the time the murals were completed in 1884, Western European art had incorporated color theories based on scientific studies of light, depicted modern scenes of contemporary life, and represented the spontaneous, ephemeral qualities of atmosphere, light, movement and change that so characterized the modern age. Revealingly, these concerns contrast sharply with Gregori’s methods and themes.

Gregori used the somber palette, stately compositions, careful modeling and idealized figures of earlier traditions. The paintings, varying in width from 5½ to 19 feet, are all 11 feet high; they are not true frescoes, since they were painted on dry plaster. Yet Gregori appears to have based his methods and concepts on a neo-Classical model of the Renaissance, which in turn based much of its artistic forms and ideals on an interpretation of the ancient world. Primary in the Renaissance model is the importance of the individual and the concept that both human experience and the physical world can be clarified and understood through a rationally constructed ordering of physical reality. In art, these ideas typically manifested themselves in the use of linear perspective, the three-dimensional modeling of form, compositional stability and the depiction of self-possessed, idealized figures. Nineteenth-century academic painters synthesized a derivative of these ideals with dramatic themes and noble subjects in a mesh of accumulated borrowings.

In the murals, Gregori depicts moments of high drama as tableaus of studied, formal poses with important figures usually depicted frontally, centrally and close to the foreground. This kind of formal framework, with its emphasis on symmetry, deliberate gestures and carefully modeled figures, strives to elevate the depicted event to an act of solemn significance. Columbus is usually centrally placed or the only figure in black, a formal device that immediately draws the viewer’s eye. In nearly every scene, whether it be one of mutiny or despair, Columbus’ visage barely varies. While Gregori depicts other individuals with expressions of anger, relief or betrayal, Columbus is monumentally impassive, the unmoved mover. These formal devices serve to create a heroic impression of Columbus; they embody a philosophy of humanity in general and Columbus in particular from which the rest of the world would soon move away.
In the 12 paintings that grace the main corridor of the Main Building, Gregori tells the story of Christopher Columbus’ journey to America much as a hagiographer might tell the story of a missionary saint. Indeed, the portrait of Christopher Columbus, Discoverer (Columbus, Explorer) in the main entrance vestibule, pictures him in full court dress, a globe by his side and finger resting on the North American continent. Columbus at the Gate of the Convent of La Rabida, located near the vestibule, begins the story by showing Columbus as a travel-weary and dejected mariner. His theories of a new route to the East Indies have been rejected by both Spanish and Portuguese authorities. Reduced to begging for bread for his son, he is about to turn to France when Father Juan Perez de Marchena hears of his plight and intercedes with Queen Isabella.

In this painting, as in all the others except the deathbed scene, the basis for Columbus’ image was Rev. Thomas E. Walsh, C.S.C., Notre Dame’s seventh president. The result of Father Perez de Marchena’s intercession is represented in Isabella the Catholic, Protectress of Columbus (also in the vestibule). Shown descending her throne arrayed in royal robes, the queen holds the box of jewels that she is said to have pawned to aid Columbus.

The next scene, Father Perez Blesses Columbus before He Embarks, shows the embarkment site at Palos on August 5, 1492. Father Perez, by whose kindness Columbus was also fed and sheltered, is seen blessing the explorer in the early morning of that fateful day.

Columbus’ journey took 70 days. It was interrupted by a mutiny of despairing and angry sailors, who insisted that Columbus turn back before food supplies were exhausted. Gregori shows this moment in The Mutiny at Sea. Here, the strength of Columbus’ faith is reflected in his calm visage, which stands in stark contrast to the violence of the mutineers.

After calming his men, Columbus pushed on, finally sighting land on October 12, 1492. Discovery of Land Friday, October 12, 1492 (Sighting of Land Friday, October 12, 1492) depicts the great exhilaration of the sighting; the leaders of the mutiny kneel before Columbus. Models for this painting included Arthur J. Stace (bearded man in foreground) and Joseph Lyons (smooth-shaven man in foreground), professors of poetry and drama at Notre Dame, as well as the University’s first librarian, James F. Edwards, seen here at the rail looking out to sea.

Taking Possession of the New World (Columbus Coming Ashore) shows Columbus planting the cross, claiming the territory in the name of Jesus Christ and of the Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella. Near Columbus stand the two Pinzon brothers who commanded the Níná and the Pinta, and by himself a bit farther out stands Amerigo Vespucci, the cartographer who would give his name to
the continent but who did not, in fact, accompany Columbus.

The largest of the murals, *Return of Columbus and Reception at Court*, depicts Columbus’ triumphant return to Granada. The U.S. Post Office chose this painting as a design for a commemorative stamp issued in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Among the models used in this painting, the artist has included himself (the man with the mustache behind the red drape at the far upper right corner). Rev. Stoffel, C.S.C., professor of Greek Language and Literature, was the model for the man looking over the artist’s shoulder. Just as Columbus had his benefactors, so did Notre Dame: Farther toward the front of the painting are the likenesses of Mrs. Rhodius, an early benefactor of the University, and her son, dressed as a court page.

More tellingly, the mindset of Gregori’s time can be seen in the way he depicts the spoils of the voyage. The page holds a Caribbean parrot with exotic plumage. Columbus, however, holds the hand of a Taino Amerindian—in full, but inaccurate, regalia—presenting him and five other Native Americans to their new rulers. Gregori did not portray the Tainos correctly but instead used the 19th-century costumes and artifacts of Plains Indians available to him at Notre Dame to depict the Caribbean peoples Columbus encountered on his first voyage. They carry metal-tipped weapons and wear costumes with decorations derived from a sleeveless rendition of a Mandan war shirt (second from Columbus) and a northern Plains pictograph (far left).

We can appreciate the murals in an almost clinical way, dissecting the quality of the images and the meanings they were meant to convey, as well as their historical veracity. But we must acknowledge the difficulty—and pain—they can engender. The images in the piece can be seen as demeaning and even insulting, particularly the way they portray the Native Americans in stereotypical ways and in subservient roles. This is, by anyone’s standards, troubling.

Likewise, the Moorish figures seated on the floor among chests of idols and specimens of birds are equated with the rich and exotic bounty won in the name of the Spanish monarchs. Their presence helps to remind viewers that this bounty includes the souls of former “heathens” converted to Christianity. Indeed, the Tainos in the painting are to be baptized shortly—a fact reinforced by the mural’s large number of clergy (12 priests
would accompany Columbus on his second voyage)—and one of them will be given the Christian name Diego Colon, after Columbus.

Behind the understandably anxious Indian group looms a massive fleet and a large crowd—17 vessels and about 1,200 people—ready to sail in the wake of the explorer. Historical records show that Columbus returned from his second voyage with 1,500 Native Americans to be sold as chattel in the Seville slave market, a fact that seldom found its way into the idealized accounts of Columbus popular at the end of the 19th century. Gregori’s pictorial story was no exception.

The last murals in the sequence depict Columbus as a victim of the earthly persecution and misunderstanding that often follows great men. In Bobadilla Betrays Columbus, the mariner is arrested by Francisco Bobadilla, a Spanish nobleman appointed as one of the rulers of the new territories. The scene is the cottage of Columbus, where he is being comforted and defended by two Native Americans.

Columbus was sent back in chains to Spain, where authorities dropped all charges against him. He retired to a monastery, and, as imagined by Gregori in Death of Columbus, died in 1506 at the age of 54. As his journey began, so it ended: The depiction of Columbus in his deathbed is modeled after Father Edward Sorin. Among the friends in attendance was a Franciscan monk at the foot of the bed leaning on a cane. Gregori used Father Louis Neyron, priest-scientist at Notre Dame and surgeon in Napoleon’s army at Waterloo, as his unwilling model for the monk. The Franciscan brother standing beside the monk bears the likeness of Brother Albeus Clarke, C.S.C., who worked for Ave Maria magazine.

Finally, the portraits, Father Diego de Deza, Protector of Columbus at Salamanca and Luiz de Santangel, Treasurer of Aragon, depict two men instrumental in Columbus’ voyage. The paintings complement the vestibule portraits of Columbus and Isabella.