

## Cool Justice: Judge Foley, Israel Putnam And The Snake

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What's up with that big snake on the third floor of the Danielson courthouse?

A snake could mean many things to many people. For the presiding judge of this courthouse, Francis Foley, it is not a pleasant sight. It might be suggestive of many negative things, a phallus, for example.

The snake is part of a painting by Mark Strathy, a professor at Central Connecticut State University. Strathy has exhibited works in New Haven, Willimantic, New York and throughout the country.

This particular painting, "An Allegory of Israel Putnam," honors the Revolutionary War hero and depicts scenes throughout Windham County. It is part of the Connecticut Commission on the Arts' Art in Public Spaces program.

Among the scenes in Strathy's work: the legend of Putnam and the slaying of a wolf; his escape from Indians who were going to burn him at the stake; and his gallop to warn townspeople about oncoming British troops. Snakes are used to represent the British forces.

"The snake wearing the powdered wig," Strathy said, "represents the bureaucratic side of the British colonial presence - the side that was responsible for taxation without representation and other confining edicts that were the cause of the revolution."

Since 1978, the commission has placed more than 330 works of art at 63 sites throughout the state. These include sculptures, paintings and photographs at courthouses in Bridgeport, Danbury, Hartford, New Haven, New London and Enfield. A 1978 law requires allocation of at least 1 percent of construction or renovation cost for state buildings to art.

Works are chosen by committees of artists, architects and community members and then approved by local site committees. As with anything that goes on at a local courthouse, the presiding judge, in custom and practice, is the bottom line.

For several months over the past year, the Israel Putnam painting languished in an exercise room, out of public view. Protracted negotiations ensued.

"There is nothing overtly or covertly crude, rude, salacious or political about this mural or the commission would never have allowed it to be accepted for public display," an arts commission staffer said in a May 28, 2003 letter to Chief Court Administrator Joseph Pellegrino. "While I can appreciate an individual's personal disdain for snakes, it would be truly regrettable if this were allowed to become the accepted criterion for the censorship of this artwork."

Foley, appointed to the bench by Gov. Weicker in 1993, relented this fall.

"I don't think the Arts Commission and I have the same idea of what it means to have a joyous celebration of Windham County," Foley told me. "But, I don't want to impose my will on anyone else. It's up. It's hanging."

Given what amounts to the absolute power of judges in what they view as "their" courthouses, Foley did not necessarily have to play ball with the Arts Commission.

It speaks well of him that he did.