Collecting Institutions Are Not Neutral
In response to the events of 1/6/21

Warning: violent images and discussion of white supremacy
When viewing images of Wednesday's attempted coup by Trump-loyal extremists who invaded the U.S. Capitol Building and displayed anti-Native, anti-Black and anti-Jewish symbology, we were struck by the layering of narratives between the violent scenes and the artworks on display in the background.

The U.S. Capitol actively houses, cares for, and displays cultural resources related to American history. **As a collecting institution ourselves, Five Oaks Museum exists in relation to that work.**
We recognize that acts of selection, preservation, interpretation, and display are not neutral. Decisions about which historic figures, events, and artists are honored and which are excluded can bring important context and nuance, but they can also have violent impacts. Our institution has participated in that violence. We acknowledge that we have benefitted and continue to benefit from this, and we hold ourselves accountable to the legacy of that harm in all of our institutional actions today.
Landing of Columbus at the Island of Guanahani, West Indies, October 12th, 1492 by John Vanderlyn
A Trump-loyal extremist poses for a photo while standing on the plinth of a statue of former President Gerald Ford, who pardoned former President Richard Nixon for his role in the Watergate scandal. There is a flag in support of President Trump inserted into the crook of the statue's arm. On the wall behind the statue, the oil painting titled "Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto" by William H. Powell is on the left and the oil painting titled "Landing of Columbus at the Island of Guanahani, West Indies" by John Vanderlyn is on the right.

Both paintings depict Native people falling on the ground in the background while a central white man - De Soto and Columbus respectively - leads a group of European soldiers in the foreground. Interpretive signage about the De Soto painting is visible.

These paintings honor the violent conquerer-discoverer image and support narratives of white supremacy and Manifest Destiny - ideologies essential to the violent extremism driving Wednesday's attack. This underscores what many BIPOC voices are saying right now: that violent insurrection fueled by white supremacist extremism is not a new or surprising incident within a U.S. context.

Image credit Saul Loeb/Agence France-Presse via Getty Images.
Charles Sumner
by Walter Ingalls
A far-right extremist wearing animal furs and holding a plastic shield and a wooden walking stick sits beneath an oil painting of Charles Sumner by portrait artist Walter Ingalls. Charles Sumner was a U.S. senator from Massachusetts who was an abolitionist and supporter of civil rights for African Americans in the Civil War and Reconstruction Eras. He was once severely injured and nearly killed when Representative Preston Brooks beat him with a walking cane on the Senate floor after Sumner made an anti-slavery speech. A small object label is located under the painting.

On the left of the image, a man carries a Confederate flag down a hallway, and on the right, a carved bust of Former President Richard Nixon (who resigned after the Watergate scandal revealed the Nixon administration covered up their connection to a break-in to the Democratic National Convention headquarters) is located on a tall pedestal in an alcove.

This image holds so many complexities, but we were particularly struck by the material connection of the wooden cane wielded against Sumner and the wooden stick carried by the Trump extremist, both in violent protection of white supremacist norms.

Image Credit Jim Lo Scalzo/European Pressphoto Agency via Shutterstock.