

## Missouri Centennial Poster: An Instructor's Guide

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In this brightly colored poster designed by Kansas-born artist Vinnorma Shaw (1890-1949), a classically dressed, blonde, fair-skinned woman is identified as "Missouri" by the text on her crown. She faces the viewer and gestures toward the framed, blue-skied scene behind her labeled in the upper corners with the dates 1821 and 1921.

In front of this allegorical personification are two figures seen from behind: a seated Native American man in an orange robe, and a buckskin-clad frontiersman. The woman symbolizing Missouri appears to be showing these figures a cloud-swept vision of Missouri's past and present. We see the white dome of Missouri's new capitol building, erected in 1917, as well as the colorful pavilions and flags of the 1921 Missouri Centennial Exposition and State Fair, which the text below states will take place in Sedalia on August 8-20. In front of the twentieth-century architecture we see visualizations of Missouri's past: a covered wagon and native people walking and on horseback. At the bottom of the poster, the words "Tell Your Neighbors" encourage viewers to spread the word about the centennial celebration.



**What do you see?** Answers will vary, but the above text sets forth the kind of general description one might expect.

**Are there more words or pictures?** The question could be answered either way, but images dominate most of the space.

**What are the main colors?** Colors include shades of blue, orange, red, pink, violet, brown, yellow, and green.

**Are there symbols? If so, what do they mean?** The classically clad personification of Missouri is a symbolic figure representing the state. Other symbols viewers might see include the state capitol building as a representation of Missouri's government and statehood, the Native American to represent Missouri's indigenous people, the frontiersman to remind us of early Euro-American explorers, and the wagon train to recall westward expansion and early settlement in the state.

**Who do you think made the poster?** The artist's name, Vinnorma Shaw, appears in small letters below the feet of the frontiersman on the poster. The organizers of the State Fair likely commissioned the poster and perhaps either allowed the artist freedom to create her own design, or provided her with strict instructions on what to represent.

**Who do you think was supposed to see the poster?** The words "Tell Your Neighbors" at the bottom of the poster suggest that the poster was aimed at potential visitors to the Missouri Centennial Exposition and State Fair, as well as Missourians who might not be able to attend the fair but would take pride in the celebration of the centennial.

**When was the poster made?** The mention of the centennial as well as the dates at the top indicate that the poster was made in 1921.

**What do you think is the main idea of the poster?** There could be many answers to this question. On one level, the main idea is to encourage viewers to attend the exposition and state fair and to celebrate the centennial. The text promotes this straightforward interpretation of the poster, as does the image of the exposition pavilions.

On a more abstract level, the imagery encourages viewers to think about how Missouri changed between 1821 and 1921. The allegorical figure of "Missouri" is showing two figures from pre-statehood days a vision of change. She seems proud to show off the domed edifice of the state's capitol, which can be understood as embodying the development of Eurocentric democratic government in Missouri. Many contemporary viewers might see the representation of Missouri as a white, Greco-Roman figure as problematic in a multiethnic state. Likewise, the simplified implication that colonialization led to "progress" in the first 100 years of statehood ignores the difficulties many indigenous people and African Americans faced – despite their essential contributions to the state's development in these years, no Missourians of African descent are even pictured on the poster. Today many people might find that the 1921 imagery represents an outdated way to commemorate the diverse people and history of Missouri.

## **About the Missouri Bicentennial Poster Competition**

The Missouri Bicentennial Commission is sponsoring a bicentennial poster competition, open to Missouri students in third through twelfth grades. The competition will result in four posters commemorating Missouri's bicentennial of statehood. Selected designs will best interpret the theme *Sharing Missouri's Stories: Past, Present, and Future*. Find competition guidelines here: <https://missouri2021.org/missouri-bicentennial-poster>

Established through executive order in October 2018, the Missouri Bicentennial Commission is charged with furthering statewide efforts to honor the State of Missouri and its rich history and heritage on the occasion of its bicentennial.

Missouri 2021 is a statewide initiative of the State Historical Society of Missouri. The mission of Missouri 2021 is to promote a better understanding of Missouri and its regions, communities, and people, both past and present. The Missouri Bicentennial provides opportunities for citizens to celebrate, explore, and share perspectives on the state's rich history and culture.