

# Legends and Myths of Ancient Minnesota

Exhibition-in-print by **Brooks Turner**

# Liberation

Edited by William Dudley Pelley

## Refugees Invading, Criminal Aliens Favored, Nine Million Unemployed ---God Help America!

On October 25, 2020, about 36,000 Twin Cities subscribers of the *Star Tribune* newspaper received the *Legends and Myths of Ancient Minnesota* an exhibition-in-print by Brooks Turner. The 32-page publication combines reproductions of original artworks with archival materials related to the Nazi following in Minnesota in the 1930s.

A fringe movement imported from Europe, in the form of a group called “Silver Shirts,” remained active—openly promoting Hitlerism and suppressing opposition to it—in the US for just a few years before being driven out with the beginning of WWII. But Silver Shirts did not take root here by simply importing European fascism: rather, their worldviews were built upon foundational elements of United States history, such as Manifest Destiny and slavery, that blended organically with the ingredients of European fascism to produce an authentically American flavor of Hitler’s and Mussolini’s following. In fact, even this gets the relationship between the two regions’ histories somewhat backwards: Hitler acknowledged, in his book *Mein Kampf*, the inspiration he took from the “racially pure and almost unmixed Germanic peoples on the American Continent [who] have risen to become the master of their land.”

Nor did the presence of fascism end with the formal dissolution of the Silver Shirts. By the end of the 1930s,

mainstream politicians and pundits (for instance, Hjalmar Petersen, Harold Stassen, Ray Chase, and others) appreciated the electoral potential the Silver Shirts’ rhetoric and visuals, which thus migrated from underground gatherings of thugs and demagogues into popular partisan politics. None of those politicians explicitly referred to Hitlerism as their inspiration, but the fascist-sourced material and vocabularies inflected American political conversations for generations to come—and remain there to this very day.

How, in the absence of clear identifiers, such as swastikas or raised hand salutes, may we recognize fascism when we see it? This is the subject of Brooks Turner’s artistic inquiry into the aesthetics of fascism.

**“ How, in the absence of clear identifiers, such as swastikas or raised hand salutes, may we recognize fascism when we see it? ”**

The term *aesthetics* denotes the study of the ways images and language evoke emotions. It is the stuff of beauty, ugliness, feelings, and subjective perceptions, which is supposed to be in opposition to *objective truth*. But this traditional understanding of aesthetics is limiting and misleading, if we consider that the very idea of *truth* is fundamentally cultural. Our sense of what is true is shaped by the shared traditions, beliefs,

and conventions that cultures develop over long periods of time; by the words, metaphors, colors, stories, and symbols in books and articles we read, speeches we hear, art we see. These ideas of *truth*, in turn, cultivate or suppress our ability to feel and express empathy, fear, love, hate, compassion, and anger.

The success of totalitarian projects—such as fascism—depends entirely on the ability of its propagators to undermine a people’s idea of truth by supplanting empathy, love, and compassion with hate, anger, and fear. This is accomplished by promoting the imagery and rhetoric of hate, anger, and fear—very often by recycling historical materials that have already “worked” for such purposes in the past: the more distant pasts of Manifest Destiny or of slavery, as well as the relatively recent history of the pre-WWII period. Sourcing materials from the Silver Shirts’ newspaper *Liberation*, Brooks Turner’s exhibition provides many examples of what “worked” in the 1930s, but is immediately recognizable today: “invasion of refugees;” “destruction of the Church;” “America First;” divisions of peoples and societies into *us* and *them*, and *here* and *there*; the “great” past we are called to return to; and, of course, the ever undead “Communist Threat.”

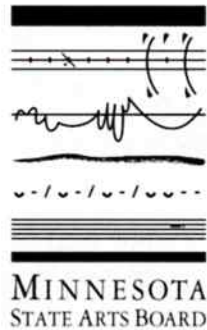
**“ Many examples of rhetoric and imagery that “worked” in the 1930s are still immediately recognizable today: “invasion of refugees;” “destruction of the Church;” “America First;” divisions of us and them, and here and there; the “great” past we are called to return to; and, of course, the ever undead “Communist Threat.”**

Among the countless aberrations of 2020 in America, there is one that stands out in the context of this conversation: a call, in the wake of protests

following George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis in May, to criminalize activities loosely gathered under the term “antifa.” Antifa stands for anti-fascism, opposition to fascism. The ideological and military expansion of fascism around the world in the 1930s violently demonstrated its destructive potential when not actively and unambiguously opposed. And yet, less than a century later, the suggestion that opposing fascism is a crime is getting public traction in the US. This development makes it clear: the same culture which defeated this dangerous ideology not so long ago has, at the same time, managed to preserve and cultivate in itself the very traits that made the rise of fascism possible to begin with. With his deep dive into the aesthetics of American fascism from the 1930s, Turner’s project reminds us: We’ve been here before, and we barely got out alive.

**Boris Oicherman**, *Cindy and Jay Ihlenfeld Curator for Creative Collaboration*

The exhibition-in-print, *Legends and Myths of Ancient Minnesota* by Brooks Turner, was delivered to Twin Cities subscribers of the *Star Tribune* on October 25, 2020. It is available to take home at WAM between October 25, 2020-January 3, 2021, and can be mailed to you by request (while the stock lasts). Submit requests, including address for posting the paper, via the **Contact Us** page of [bundleofsticks.art](http://bundleofsticks.art)



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Brooks Turner is a fiscal year 2020 recipient of an Artist Initiative grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board. This project is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund.

This project is made possible in part with the support of Rimon: the Minnesota Jewish Arts Council, an initiative of the Minneapolis Jewish Federation.

This publication is co-presented by the Target Studio for Creative Collaboration at the Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota Twin Cities. Printed by the *Star Tribune*.