

WHITEWASHING HISTORY

The seven member Board of Education in San Francisco has voted unanimously to destroy eighty year old murals in a public high school. In addition to depicting George Washington as a soldier, surveyor, statesman and signer of the Declaration of Independence, they also show George Washington with a dead Indian, and as a slave owner.

Victor Arnautoff (1896–1979) painted the 13 panel murals — covering 1,600 square feet — in 1936 for the just-built George Washington High School to depict the life of Washington.

“This is a radical and critical work of art,” the school’s alumni association argued. *“There are many New Deal murals depicting the founding of our country; very few even acknowledge slavery or the Native genocide. The Arnautoff murals should be preserved for their artistic, historical and educational value.*

Whitewashing them will simply result in another ‘whitewash’ of the full truth about American history.” Lope Yap, Jr., vice president of the Washington High School Alumni Association and a 1970 graduate, says when he was a student and saw the mural he was *“awed by the subtle ways Arnautoff was able to critique American history.”* He said the depictions are *“treasures, priceless art”* and painting it over is tantamount to pretending the history depicted never happened.

“I’m not into censorship,” Yap said. *“I would want to deal with history so we can prevent this from ever happening again.”*

Richard Walker, a professor emeritus of geography at the University of California, Berkeley and director of the history project, Living New Deal, said the Washington mural is meant to show the *“uncomfortable facts”* about America’s first president. For that, it was among many New Deal works of art considered radical when created. *“We on the left ought to welcome the honest portrayal,”* Walker said, adding that destroying a piece of art *“is the worst way we can deal with historic malfeasance, historic evils.”*

Such appeals to reason and history failed to sway the school board. It dismissed the option of covering the murals, archiving the the historic artwork for some unimaginable more enlightened era, instead voting unanimously to paint them over.

Mark Sanchez, the school board’s vice president said that simply concealing the murals wasn’t an option because it would *“allow for the possibility of them being uncovered in the future.”* Destroying them was worth it regardless of the cost, he argued at the hearing, saying, *“This is reparations.”* The San Francisco board of education will spend up to \$600,000 to paint over the historical artwork.

These and other explanations from the board’s members reflected the logic of the **Reflection and Action Working Group**, a committee of activists, students, artists and others *put together last year by the district.* Arnautoff’s work, the group concluded in February, *“glorifies slavery, genocide, colonization, Manifest Destiny, white supremacy, oppression, etc.”* *The art does not reflect “social justice,”* the group said, and it *“is not student-centered if it’s focused on the legacy of artists, rather than the experience of the students.”*

Victor Arnautoff, a Russian immigrant, was perhaps the most important muralist in the Bay Area during the Depression. Thanks to President Franklin Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration, he had the opportunity to make some enduring public artworks. Among them is **“City Life”** in Coit Tower, in which the artist painted himself standing in front of a newspaper rack conspicuously missing the mainstream San Francisco Chronicle and packed with publications like The Daily Worker.

Arnautoff, who had assisted Diego Rivera in Mexico, was a committed Communist. *“‘Art for art’s sake’ or art as perfume have never appealed to me,”* he said in 1935. *“The artist is a critic of society.”*

This is why his freshly banned work, *“Life of Washington,”* does not show the clichéd image of our first president kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge. Instead, the panels depict his slaves picking cotton in the fields of Mount Vernon and a group of colonizers walking past the corpse of a Native American.

“At the time, high school history classes typically ignored the incongruity that Washington and others among the nation’s founders subscribed to the declaration that ‘all men are created equal’ and yet owned other human beings as chattel,” Robert W. Cherny writes in *“Victor Arnautoff and the Politics of Art.”*

In other words, Arnautoff’s **purpose** was to unsettle the viewer, to provoke young people into looking at American history from a different, darker perspective.



Over the past months, art historians, New Deal scholars and even a group called the Congress of Russian Americans have tried to make exactly that point.

The notion of erasing art has an American pedigree. Arnautoff was intimately familiar with it, having been interrogated in 1956 by the House Un-American Activities Committee for drawing a caricature of Vice President Richard Nixon. But I suspect he would have been surprised to learn that more than 60 years later, progressives in charge of educating San Francisco’s children are merrily following this un-American playbook.

Many of the school’s actual students seemed to disagree with the Board’s decision. Of 49 freshmen asked to write about the murals, only four supported their removal. John M. Strain, an English teacher, says that his students *“feel bad about offending people but they almost universally don’t think the answer is to erase it.”* Which makes one wonder who these bureaucrats actually seek to protect. Is it the students? Or could it also be their reputations, given that those in favor of preserving the murals are being smeared as racists?

Mr. Sanchez, the board vice president, told me: *“A grave mistake was made 80 years ago to paint a mural at a school without Native American or African-American input. For impressionable young people who attend school to have any representation that diminishes people, specifically students from communities that have already been diminished, it’s an aggressive thing. It’s hurtful and I don’t think our students need to bear that burden.”*

The implications of this logic are chilling. What happens when a student suggests that looking at photographs of the My Lai massacre in history class is too traumatic? Should newspapers avoid printing upsetting images that illuminate the crisis at the border, like the unforgettable one of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, facedown, drowned in the Rio Grande?

The San Francisco School Board’s decision to paint over the 83-year-old mural is prompting some to worry that other artwork from the so-called New Deal era could face a similar fate because of changing sensitivities.

“If K-12 schools start to provide top-down total protection from the emotional pain of confronting uncomfortable ideas — like what actually happened in real American history — we should not be at all surprised when these people go on to college campuses and then, into the work force, and demand the same sort of comforts: safe spaces, trigger warnings, microaggression prevention, and so on,” said Robby Soave, the author of *“Panic Attack: Young Radicals in the Age of Trump.”* All are fair game for censorship in a worldview that insists that words and images are to be judged based on how *“safe”* they make people feel.

Artist Dewey Crumpler, now an associate professor at the San Francisco Art Institute, has seen this controversy before. He was once part of the solution in the turbulence of the late 1960s civil rights movement, Crumpler, who had just graduated from Balboa High School, was asked by a group of African American students at George Washington to paint more empowering murals at the school. The Black Students Union originally wanted the murals destroyed because of their derogatory and negative depictions of African Americans and Native Americans.

“The imagery was derogatory,” Crumpler said *“In the sense that even though Arnautoff was attempting to use it to address the contradiction in the founding father — you know owning slaves, and having trodden over the native American — under no circumstances should that kind of imagery be the primary imagery that students be confronted with when they needed equally empowering imagery. That was my stance. But I explained that I did not believe that history should be whitewashed or that artists or artists’ work should be destroyed or censored, because it was a teaching tool. If you had the original source and a counter source, you could use that as a*

way of dialoguing about the controversy and the contradictions.”

The students wanted the murals destroyed, covered up or painted over. By the fall of 1968, nothing had been done and about 250 students marched in the hallways one day in October, shouting *“Take it down, take it down.”* The murals were briefly covered up with butcher paper by school officials. The students ultimately voted to keep the murals but they came up with a proposal to install plaques with more information alongside the murals. A group was formed to study the need for a new mural depicting events in black history.

That’s where Crumpler came in, as the artist the students selected to paint additional murals. He faced some opposition from the San Francisco Arts Commission and the Board of Education because he was so young. Then, an unknown student threw ink on the Native American in the **“Westward Expansion”** mural, which got soaked into the plaster, and the school realized it had to do something.

“At that point, they really were nervous because they wanted to protect Arnautoff’s murals because of their historic value,” Crumpler said. So in early 1970, he was hired. Over a five year period Crumpler painted three murals in another location at the school, all facing each other in a U-shaped area, above student bulletin boards and school photos. The students got involved in developing the theme for the murals, and they decided to widen the focus beyond African Americans and Native Americans to include other races, including Latino and Asian students. Crumpler’s three murals were unveiled in 1974.

Today Crumpler believes that there are options the school could take, instead of destroying the murals.. *“Censoring art is going to make them more powerful,”* he said. *“Because the minute you cover it up, it becomes more important than it was....So you have to use history for what it is, which is a way of understanding how to shift the context from the past to the present.”* He also noted that if Arnautoff’s murals are destroyed- which would mean painting over them, they cannot be moved since as frescos they are painted into and integral with the then fresh plaster of the walls- the context for his own work is also destroyed. *“Because mine was counter-related to his mural. My point is you can’t remove history, history exists, so you have to use it to teach. That’s its role, is to teach,”* Crumpler said.

The George Washington High School Alumni Association also has several suggestions, instead of destroying Arnautoff’s social realist murals, and therefore engaging in censorship of art, from screening the murals to placing interpretive panels, to adding new murals in prominent locations at the school.

Painting over the murals won’t happen immediately, they will be covered up until the now controversial issues are resolved. The board plans include creating a digital archive the mural. Most of the \$600,000 earmarked for the “removal” project will go toward a required environmental review and to cover expected legal challenges.

Supporters of the mural worry that painting over it may signal that it’s acceptable to destroy the thousands of other New Deal murals across the country.

“As a student at George Washington High School in San Francisco more than half a century ago, when the student body was almost entirely white (and looked and thought like me), I was inspired by the honesty of those murals. I was also inspired by the honesty of the public institutions that were bold enough to put them on the front stairway of the school. This is a sad time for my city.”

– Brian Katcher
San Francisco

A GREENFUSE REMIX
with help from the reporting of
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