

# San Francisco Board of Education to decide on the fate of historic murals said to be “offensive”

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The San Francisco Board of Education is currently considering the removal and destruction of 83-year-old murals depicting the life of George Washington, which treat the issues of slavery and Native American genocide. The campaign against the art work is censorious and deeply misguided, bound up with contemporary identity politics, and has nothing progressive about it.

Thirteen murals in total have covered the walls of George Washington High School since its opening in 1936, two of which have been the subject of complaints since the 1960s. The debate has re-emerged over the last couple of years due to the possibility of the school’s designation as a historical landmark, an action that would make the murals very difficult to remove.

The works were created shortly before the opening of the school by renowned artist Victor Arnautoff, a Russian immigrant, as a project of the federal government’s Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Arnautoff had an extraordinary history. During the civil war that followed the October Revolution in Russia, Arnautoff served as a cavalry captain in the counter-revolutionary White Army. Later, he supervised the cavalry of a Chinese warlord! He eventually emigrated to the US and arrived in San Francisco in 1925. Four years later, Arnautoff moved his family to Mexico and became an assistant muralist to Diego Rivera, the great left-wing Mexican artist. In the 1930s, he became the best-known muralist in San Francisco.

In the meantime, Arnautoff had shifted politically to the left and joined the Communist Party. While teaching art at Stanford University in the 1950s, he was investigated and interrogated by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Stanford was urged to dismiss him, which to its credit, the university did not do. After retiring, Arnautoff moved to the Soviet Union where he died in 1979.

Along with the striking murals at George Washington High School, Arnautoff completed numerous projects around San Francisco, including murals at the Palo Alto Clinic, Presidio Chapel, the library at the California School of Fine Arts and Coit Tower.

The complaints against the high school murals—produced during a period when left-wing views dominated artistic circles in San Francisco, a city that had experienced a historic general strike only two years earlier, in July 1934—are wrongheaded from every point

of view.

In one of the disputed murals, a dead Native American is shown on the ground in a scene depicting the westward expansion of US capitalism in the mid-19th century. The mural is obviously intended to shed light on the forced removal and mass destruction of the Native American population and offers a critical view that was previously often neglected or ignored in American schools.

In the second controversial mural, slaves belonging to George Washington are shown working in the fields at Mount Vernon, Washington’s estate in Virginia, and presumably being bought or sold at auction. In other words, Arnautoff’s work was hardly hagiographic. It attempted to present the contradictory reality of early American life.

Arnautoff carried out the work using the *buon fresco* process (also used by Rivera in his murals in Detroit and elsewhere), “painting with earth-tone pigments directly onto the building’s wet plaster before it dried,” according to the Richmond District Blog.

*OutsideLands.org* reports, “Since murals have to be painted on a wet surface, Mr. Arnautoff had to follow right behind the plasterers, and a scene, once begun, had to be completed that same day, in order that the walls did not dry. Carpenters and plasterers worked all around the building, while Mr. Arnautoff was above on a scaffold. ...

“The artist was so rushed for time that he had to improvise as he was painting. Covering about nine feet of wall a day, he sometimes worked from ten to twelve hours a day to finish a given section. The murals took ten months to complete; ironically, the school was not opened until a full year later.”

This remarkable artistic achievement, for which Arnautoff did extensive historical research, now faces possible destruction (the murals are so embedded that they cannot be removed from the walls), thanks to petty bourgeois elements who claim the work is “offensive” and “traumatizing.”

The San Francisco Unified School Board (SFUSD) appointed a “Reflection and Action Group” largely made up of opponents of the murals to make a recommendation about whether to keep or remove the work. The group recently voted 12 to 1 in favor of removing *all* 13 murals from the walls.

The group members came to their recommendation, they asserted in a statement, “due to the continued historical and current

trauma of Native Americans and African Americans with these depictions in the mural that glorifies slavery, genocide, colonization, manifest destiny, white supremacy, oppression, etc. This mural doesn't represent SFUSD values of social justice, diversity, united, student-centered. It's not student-centered if it's focused on the legacy of artists, rather than the experience of the students."

No objective observer could possibly conclude that the murals "glorify" slavery or genocide. The use of phrases such as "social justice" and "bias through stereotypes" are simply plucked out of thin air and divorced from any historical or political context to serve a right-wing and repressive agenda.

Tellingly, the current identity politics campaign arises in regard to a *critical* portrayal of Washington's historical role. Numerous attempts have been made by similar layers in recent years to deny any progressive content to the American Revolution, one of the earthshaking events that ushered in the modern world. As the WWS has explained, the American Revolution "was a bourgeois-democratic revolution, and not a socialist revolution. It could assert universal human equality, but it could not bring it about. Yet, like all great historical events, it had implications and consequences that went beyond the constraints imposed upon it by its own time."

George Washington, the subject of the murals in question and the school's namesake, was a contradictory figure, like all bourgeois revolutionaries. A slave owner, he also led a struggle against the powerful British monarchy, the divine right of kings and for a world rooted in the progressive ideals of the Enlightenment, a struggle that inspired revolutionaries and revolutions in different parts of the world. The "implications and consequences" of the American Revolution ultimately included the bloody conflict that erupted some 80 years later, the Civil War, which violently destroyed the slave system.

The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, in his famous 1852 speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?," indicted slavery and inequality in the US, but pointed at the same time to the radical impulse of the American Revolution. He paid this tribute to the Founding Fathers, "With them, nothing was 'settled' that was not right. With them, justice, liberty and humanity were 'final'; not slavery and oppression. You may well cherish the memory of such men. They were great in their day and generation."

The claim made by Stevon Cook, president of the San Francisco Board of Education, that Arnautoff's honest and dynamic murals are "offensive to certain communities" (*New York Times*) simply doesn't hold water. It largely "offends" middle class elements who do not want students to encounter complex and challenging art work. In the end, well-heeled African Americans and other prosperous minorities fear the radicalizing influence of such efforts.

In any event, if all potentially "offensive" art were removed, what would be left? Notably, the *Times* article admits that when a class of 49 freshmen was asked to write essays about the frescoes, "Only four favored removal." One student wrote, "The fresco shows us exactly how brutal colonization and genocide really were and are. The fresco is a warning and reminder of the fallibility of

our hallowed leaders."

While scrolling through the comments sections beneath the various articles published following the release of the Reflection and Action Group's recommendation, it is difficult to find a single reader supporting the removal of the murals. Many school alumni and teachers, as well as current students, have criticized the group and expressed support for the murals. Some of the alumni argue that exposure to Arnautoff's work was one of the most memorable educational experiences during their time at the school.

On one blog, Stephanie Glick Dove wrote, "Please do not whitewash our history. It's dangerous not to have these images of our history to learn from. We need to keep examples of our past to save our future."

Another comment reads, "Why would anyone want them removed or destroyed, they are art. I thought only fascists destroyed works of art. It's hard to believe the painter a persecuted Russian immigrant in 1936 would create something offensive and city officials would let him do it."

One could draw a parallel between the current attack on the high school murals and the campaign Arnautoff and other left-wing artists faced when painting the Coit Tower murals, a project that coincided almost exactly with the 1934 General Strike.

Because Arnautoff and his collaborators adopted a realistic and sympathetic attitude toward the strike in their work, they faced scrutiny as "communist agitators." The opening of the murals was delayed and at the time of their public unveiling, a *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist commented, "The very fact that there is a continuous controversy about the Coit Tower murals would show that there is something wrong with them. ... The humble writer's shrewd guess is that the next generation will have these daubs painted out in a delicate light green by a union house painter."

Another historical parallel, of course, and one that is equally unflattering, would be the destruction of Diego Rivera's fresco, *Man at the Crossroads*, in the lobby of New York City's Rockefeller Center in 1934. Nelson Rockefeller ordered the plastering over of the work because it included an image of Vladimir Lenin.

Suppose an artist had the audacity to propose painting a mural depicting the millions of victims of US wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan in a high school today? Or a work exposing the brutal treatment of children and families held in private detention centers on the US border with Mexico? What sort of reception would this receive from the media and political establishment?

Historical debates reveal as much or more about the present as they do about the past.

The current controversy around the George Washington High School murals painted in 1936 points to two interrelated processes: the turbulent movement of the working class and youth to the left and the rapid movement of selfish, aspiring layers of the upper middle class in the other direction.



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