Intent vs. Impact: Archiving Victor Arnautoff's "Life of Washington" Murals

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ABSTRACT: In the wake of the political environment of the late 2010s, debates over public monuments, particularly those that promote white supremacy ideology, have become heated. The "Life of Washington" murals at San Francisco's George Washington High School represent an interesting complication in the national conversation; while the artist intended for them to be a critique of the idealized colonialist narrative, some modern viewers take offense at what appear to be stereotyped images of enslaved African Americans and Indigenous people. Calls to paint over the murals in order to protect students from emotional trauma have been loudly criticized as attempts to censor history and destroy art. In this paper, I describe the various controversies surrounding the murals, how they were addressed, and ways in which they are archived.

In the summer of 2019, George Washington High School rose to national attention when the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) voted to destroy the 84-year-old murals located in the school's lobby.[1] The decision to paint over images that could upset students was highly criticized by liberal and conservative media outlets alike, and inspired heated debates about historical relevancy, political correctness, emotional triggering, and censorship. The SFUSD later compromised, voting to conceal the murals rather than destroy them,[2] but the ultimate fate of the murals remains undecided. While the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed the need for immediate action, the debate will begin again once in-person learning resumes, which makes the present moment a suitable one for an archivist gathering evidence and preparing a digital archive. Along with materials regarding the creation of the mural itself, a comprehensive archive would also need to document the conversations and criticisms surrounding the mural; while the intent of the work may be unchanging, its impact has evolved over the years depending on its audience and the current political climate.

George Washington High School (GWHS) is an Art Deco-style building in San Francisco's Richmond District. Built in the mid-1930s, it houses several murals and sculptures funded by the Works Progress Administration program, the most prominent of which is the "Life of Washington," a thirteen-panel, 1600 square-foot mural located in the school's lobby. It was painted by the Russian/American artist Victor Arnautoff and was, at the time, "the largest WPA-funded single-artist mural site on the Pacific Coast." [3] The murals were painted in the fresco

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[1] Pogash, Carol. "These High School Murals Depict an Ugly History. Should they Go?" *New York Times (Online).* April 11, 2019. https://search.proquest.com/docview/2207144464

[2] Pogash, Carol. "San Francisco School Board Votes to Hide, but Not Destroy, Disputed Murals." *New York Times (Online).* August 14, 2019. https://search.proquest.com/docview/2272587278

[3] Sarah B. "Historic WPA Murals at George Washington High School Are Facing Destruction Due to Controversial Depictions of Native Americans and African-Americans." *Richmond District Blog (blog),* April 9, 2019. https://richmondsfblog.com/2019/04/09/historic-wpa-murals-at-george-washington-high-school-are-facing-destruction-due-to-controversial-depictions-of-native-americans-and-african-americans/.

style, meaning that colors were painted directly into the wet plaster of the walls and ceiling, thereby becoming part of the building itself (and thus, hard to alter).

Arnautoff was a social realist, known for his radical leftist views; as technical director of the Coit Tower Mural project, he incorporated Communist imagery into his "City Life" mural, which caused a commotion[4]. According to his biographer, Robert W. Cherny, Arnautoff said, "The Artist must be a critic of his society."[5] In contrast to the mainstream, idealized story of George Washington that was taught in schools in the early 20th century, the "Life of Washington" murals offer a harsh but realistic counter-narrative, reminding its viewers that the country was founded upon the lives of enslaved, indigenous, and impoverished people, and that even national heroes were complicit in genocide and social injustice. Particularly during a period in which the school's students were mostly white, this mural served as a jarring reminder of the privileges that systemic oppression of others afforded them.

While the fate of the mural as a whole being decided, only two of the thirteen panels are under extreme scrutiny. The first shows Washington arriving at his home in Mount Vernon, where his estate is being tended to by enslaved African Americans, drawing attention to the fact that while Washington fought for freedom, his economic prosperity depended on enslaved labor.[6] The second panel, known as "Westward Expansion," shows several pioneers painted in grey stepping over the body of an indigenous man, which "symboliz[es] the death and displacement of the nation's First Peoples."[7] (A rather unfortunate tradition has endured as generations of

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[4] Lash, Alex. "At SF's Washington High, an 83-Year-Old Mural Depicting People of Color is Again Under Fire." *The Frisc.* April 30, 2019. https://thefrisc.com/at-sfs-washington-high-an-83-year-old-mural-depicting-slaves-and-a-dead-native-american-is-again-b2b576bdf5da.

[5] Cherny, Robert W. "The 'Life of Washington' Murals Explained." *The Living New Deal (blog).* September 3, 2019. https://livingnewdeal.org/the-life-of-washington-murals-explained/.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Cherny, Robert W. "San Francisco's New Deal Murals in Long-Term Perspective: Controversy, Neglect, and Restoration." *California History,* Vol. 97, Number 1, pp. 3-32.

students have told their friends, "Meet me at the dead Indian,"[8] due to the panel's convenient location.)

Robert W. Cherny, a professor emeritus at San Francisco State University, has been the murals' most vocal defender, attending committee meetings and hearings to provide the artist's original intent as context. His biographical study, "Victor Arnautoff and the Politics of Art," was based on extensive primary and secondary sources, including microfilm of Arnautoff's papers from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, interviews with Arnautoff's children and grandchildren who lent boxes of family papers, Arnautoff's published autobiography, and his immigration and FBI files. In the Preface and Acknowledgements, Cherny is clear about the caveats that these resources entail, from possible translation errors to the filtering of information by Soviet editors.[9] Nevertheless, he seems to be a reliable source when it comes to determining Arnautoff's artistic vision for his murals.

By the late 1960s, the demographics of had changed, with a rise in Black, Latin American and Asian students. Robin D. G. Kelley writes, "In the spring of 1968, during a schoolwide discussion of racial tensions at Washington High, a group of black students expressed resentment over the work's representation of African Americans. They did not object to Arnautoff's depiction of slavery itself but rather the "one-sidedness of the presentation."[10] The Black Student Union argued that the murals showed African Americans as passive, resigned victims, whereas they could have been pictured fighting in Washington's army and participating in these other historical events. After much debate, rather than alter or paint over the existing murals, it was

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[8] Waxmann, Laura. "Education leaders oppose landmark designations for three SF schools over controversial mural." *San Francisco Examiner (Online).* March 8, 2018. https://www.sfexaminer.com/news/education-leaders-oppose-landmark-designations-for-three-sf-schools-over-controversial-mural/

[9] Cherny, Robert W. "Preface and Acknowledgements." *Victor Arnautoff and the Politics of Art.* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017) xi-xvii.

[10] Kelley, Robin D.G. "We're Getting These Murals All Wrong." *The Nation (Online).* September 10, 2019. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/arnautoff-mural-life-washington/

decided that a set of response murals depicting the active roles that African American, Asian American, Latinx and Indigenous people had in shaping United States History. The resulting triptych, called "Multi-Ethnic Heritage: Black, Asian, Latin/Native American," was painted by Dewey Crumpler, a young activist and artist who went on to become an Associate Professor of Painting at the San Francisco Art Institute. The three murals "celebrated the cultural, political, and intellectual histories" of BIPOC, and "are linked by a motif of chains breaking".[11] While these murals are rarely mentioned in the articles about the current controversy, Crumpler himself is a vocal defender of the Arnautoff murals. He has told multiple media outlets, "My mural is part of the Arnautoff mural, part of its meaning, and its meaning is part of mine. If you destroy his work of art, you are destroying mine as well."[12]

The documentation of this aspect of the murals' life is tied up with the larger story of the Civil Rights demonstrations and the Black Panther movement occurring in the Bay Area in the late 1960s. Records of significant events outside of the school, materials from student groups petitioning the school board to replace the murals, and personal testimonies from alumni describing the process of taking a stand should be included within the archive. These items provide the social and political context for how the murals were being interpreted. Additionally, notes from when Crumpler was designing his response murals, as well as feedback from the BSU and School Board, would describe the process of integrating new perspectives into the artwork as a whole.

The murals were largely ignored until the late 2010s, when the American Indian Parent Advisory Committee, spurred by the calls to remove Confederate statues and other monuments

[11] Kelley, Robin D.G. Ibid.
[12] Davis, Ben. "This Artist Painted the Black Radical Response to the George Washington Slaveholder Murals. Here's Why He Stands Against Destroying Them." *Artnetnews*. July 10, 2019 https://news.artnet.com/art-world/san-francisco-mural-victor-arnautoff-dewey-crumpler-1596409

to white supremacy, called on the SFUSD board to remove the murals, which were seen as harmful to students. Amy Anderson, an Indigenous parent, was quoted as saying "We need to have different murals for our children to walk by, rather than stereotyping African Americans as powerless slaves and these other stereotypes of American Indian people. Every child deserves to walk by something that is empowering and this is not empowering. . . . They traumatize under the guise of educating."[13] When GWHS was nominated in 2018 by the San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission to be designated a city landmark, the AIPAC interfered, knowing that landmark status would protect the murals from being altered or destroyed.[14] Later that year, the SFUSD formed a small Reflection and Action Group (R&AG) to determine what actions would best serve to address "the social and emotional impact of mural images" on the students.[15] While defenders of the murals proposed compromises such as adding interpretive plaques, screening or curtaining off the offending panels, or creating additional response murals, the group ultimately decided to "digitally archive" the murals and cover the thirteen physical panels with white paint. The following is the transcript of their handwritten statement:

> "We come to these recommendations 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. If we consider the SFUSD equity definition, the "low" mural glorifies oppression instead of

[13] Cherny, Robert W. "San Francisco's New Deal Murals in Long-Term Perspective", ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

> eliminating it. It also perpetuates bias through stereotypes rather than ending bias. It has nothing to do with equity or inclusion at all. The impact of this mural is greater than its intent ever was. It's not a counter-narrative if [the mural] traumatizes students and community members."[16]

The committee's decision, announced in the late spring of 2019, was highly publicized in national newspapers and media, many of which criticized the destruction of art and censorship of American history; by August 2019, facing nationwide backlash and the prospect of spending upwards of $600,000 to paint over the murals, the board modified the decision, voting to cover the murals rather than destroy them entirely.[17] As of December 2020, the murals still exist, and it is yet to be seen what will actually happen to them.

The R&AG's statement notes that the impact of the murals outweighs the original intent of the artist, which is to say that just because it was made in good faith does not mean it will necessarily be interpreted that way. In 1936, the murals' intent was to confront the white-majority students, faculty, and staff with the real, unglorified story of the figure for whom their school was named, a history that was – and is – often glossed over in textbooks. In many of the panels, Washington is not the focal point of the composition; rather, the consequences of his actions and the people who were affected by them are the most prevalent aspect. However, over 80 years later, the school's demographics have changed dramatically, with 91% minority enrollment (4% Black, 0.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native) and 54% economically disadvantaged.[18] People from different backgrounds will not see the murals in the exact same way, particularly when there is no explanation of the artist's original purpose, and come to their

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[16] Cherny, Robert W. "San Francisco's New Deal Murals in Long-Term Perspective", ibid.
[17] Kelley, Robin D. G. Ibid.
[18] "George Washington High School." US News & World Report. https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/california/districts/san-francisco-unified-school-district/george-washington-high-school-3258

own conclusions about what it means. Saul and Marsh (2018), citing Chelsea Carter at the American Archaeological Association's annual meeting, are reminded that "the underlying racisms represented by public monuments have long been part of discussions (and everyday life) in local communities and among people of color, however novel they might seem to [white] academics."[19]

While the mural itself has not changed, the socio-political context in which it is viewed has; students who witness or experience injustice firsthand do not need wall art to be reminded that it exists in the United States. With the rise in visible hate crimes and police brutality within the last decade, people are reassessing public monuments, place names, and statues in light of their underlying ideology and deciding whether they ought to be removed. Saul and Marsh (2018) address the need to question public monuments that "normalize racisms, first by ignoring the Indigenous lands upon which the United States exists and second by choosing to minimize the impact of a long trajectory of industrial capitalism that enslaved and brutalized hundreds of thousands of people forced to come to this country (Byrd 2011)."[20] Arnautoff's work does the exact opposite, making its audience reckon with the forced removal of Indigenous people from their land and the enslaved labor on which the United States developed its economic wealth. Unfortunately, the impact of these actions has endured for hundreds of years, and rather than teaching a lesson about the past, these panels may remind some BIPOC students of the disadvantages that they continue to face today. Regarding the decision to destroy the murals, the SFUSD board issued a statement in July 2019:

[19] Saul, Gwendolyn W. and Diana E. Marsh. (2018) "In Whose Honor? On Monuments, Public Spaces, Historical Narratives, and Memory." *Museum Anthropology,* Vol. 41, Iss. 2, pp. 117-20.
[20] Ibid.

> "Ultimately, our school board came down on the side of communities that we all know have had their priorities ignored when it comes to just about anything, historically or presently, and certainly not regarding how they are depicted in centuries past public works of art. The school board decided that amplification of voices who have all too often been silenced was the course to go, with confidence that the decision will land on the right side of history."[21]

However, not all members of a given community feel the same way; Christine Pawley (2006) cautions against using "multiculturalism" as an umbrella term[22] to cover all non-white peoples, and the same could be said for those on either side of this issue. At a public board meeting, Cherny noted that among the mural supporters "were ethnically diverse, but most were white. Few, if any, appeared to be under thirty… Those wanting to destroy the murals were younger and included very few whites."[23]

This current stage of the controversy would best be documented by archiving the sheer number of op-eds, blog posts, newspaper articles, and interviews with people who are for or against destroying the murals. Copies of board meeting minutes, transcriptions of the recorded meetings and public comments are essential for future historians to understand the level of anger and urgency on both sides of the debate. The archive should also include interviews and surveys of the current student body, whose opinions on their school's murals have gone largely unrecorded by the press. While adults on the committees claim that the murals are traumatizing the students, or should be replaced with more positive imagery, several (admittedly small) surveys show that students mostly seem ambivalent to the work, or are otherwise not perturbed

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[21] Cherny, Robert W. "San Francisco's New Deal Murals in Long-Term Perspective", ibid.
[22] Pawley, Christine. (2006) "Unequal Legacies: Race and Multiculturalism in the LIS Curriculum." *Library Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 2, pp. 149–168.
[23] Cherny, Robert W. Ibid.

enough to want it painted over.[24] The lack of published student opinion might be due to ethical or legal concerns regarding the media interviewing minors, or because, unlike the Black Student Union that contributed to the commissioning of the response murals, there isn't a large student group loudly advocating for change.

While the "Life of Washington" has been photographed many times (or at least, the offending panels have), these particular images do not constitute a digital archive, particularly if this archive is meant to replace the physical murals. A digital archive should feature high-resolution photographs of all the panels, as well as some way of showing the spatial location of these panels within the lobby, since they were integrated into the building itself. Each image should include a description of the panel for better accessibility, as well as contextual information about the historical and artistic meaning of the panels. Cherny's blog post about the murals with historical commentary serves as a decent starting point for those curious about the art's context.[25] The San Francisco Chronicle created two 360-degree videos that allow users to see the murals as they are currently situated.[26] Ironically, if the physical murals were painted over, the digital version would reach a larger audience, since the school is generally closed to the public for the safety of its students.

It will be interesting to see if the SFUSD board is more amenable to compromises post-COVID-19. It's been over a year since the murals were last discussed, and because students are not on campus, the urgency to act has waned. Perhaps explanatory plaques will be added to explain the historical background and artistic intent. Other WPA-art sites in San Francisco

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[24] Asimov, Nanette. "Washington High students speak out after summer battle over murals." *San Francisco Chronicle (Online).* August 19, 2019. https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Washington-High-students-speak-out-after-summer-14361949.php

[25] Cherny, Robert W. "The Life of Washington Murals Explained." Ibid.

[26] "Now you can zoom in on the entire "Washington High mural – right here." *San Francisco Chronicle (Online).* August 16, 2019. https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Now-you-can-see-all-of-the-controversial-14308480.php

feature descriptions to help modern audiences understand what they are seeing, and a similar solution at GWHS could help alleviate some of the concerns people may have when seeing the images for the first time. Perhaps another set of response murals will be commissioned to represent the struggles and triumphs of the current generation of students. Or perhaps, under the stress of adjusting to the new normal of in-person education, the controversy will disappear for another fifty years.

This case has fueled much debate on the nature of censorship, whitewashing, emotional validity, and artistic representation. In an interview about Confederate statues, Professor Jennifer Allen said, "Monuments are not static things that have a single narrative behind them…. Monuments are objects whose meaning and significance we create daily."[27] If students are given the tools to understand the historical context behind the "Life of Washington" – along with the space to explore BIPOC narratives within the curriculum and feel empowered as young adults – the murals will fade into the background.

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[27] "What Our Monuments (Don't) Teach Us About Remembering the Past." *Code Switch (Blog).* August 23, 2017. https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/08/23/545548965/what-our-monuments-don-t-teach-us-about-remembering-the-past

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