

**NATIONAL
COALITION
AGAINST
CENSORSHIP**

**ARTS
ADVOCACY
PROGRAM**

May 6, 2019

Vincent Matthews, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools
555 Franklin Street, Room 301
San Francisco, CA 94102
Tel: (415) 241-6121
Email: matthewsv@sfusd.edu

Dear Superintendent Matthews,

As an organization dedicated to promoting free speech, including freedom of artistic expression, we were concerned to learn that the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) is considering removing thirteen 1930s Works Progress Administration (WPA) murals from George Washington High School. Since the murals were created in fresco, their removal can only be achieved by the irreversible act of destroying them. NCAC strongly urges the district to consider the serious ramifications of the irreversible act of destroying an artwork, as well as the precedent it would set for other works installed in San Francisco public schools that could spark strong emotions in the future. We ask the district to leave the murals in place and provide additional context and programming around them.

The Reflections and Action Committee that was convened in order to decide the fate of the murals says they must be removed because their subject matter is disturbing to high school students. This includes images of George Washington's slaves working in the fields of Mount Vernon and images of Washington pointing westward over the dead body of a Native American. While the committee maintains that the work "glorifies slavery, genocide, colonization, Manifest Destiny, white supremacy, oppression, etc.", the murals, created by Russian-American social realist painter Victor Arnautoff, who inserted his progressive views into the work, aim to portray the violence of U.S. history, which is often whitewashed in textbooks, even to this day.

As we re-evaluate painful public visual representations of white supremacy that demonstrate our national legacy of racial divisiveness, we must not confuse political artworks like Arnautoff's with historical monuments intended to send a clear racist message. Arnautoff's murals do exactly the opposite. They provide a counter-narrative to sanitized versions of American history and progress, a version that covers up the fact that American history is

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AICA-USA
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American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Federation of Teachers
American Jewish Committee
American Library Association
American Literary Translators Association
American Orthopsychiatric Association
American Society of Journalists & Authors
Americans United for Separation of Church
& State
Association of American Publishers
Authors Guild
Catholics for Choice
Children's Literature Association
College Art Association
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
The Creative Coalition
Directors Guild of America
The Dramatists Guild of America
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
Educational Book & Media Association
First Amendment Lawyers Association
Free Speech Coalition
International Literacy Association
Lambda Legal
Modern Language Association
National Center for Science Education
National Communication Association
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of the Churches
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
National Youth Rights Association
The NewsGuild-CWA
PEN America
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Planned Parenthood Federation
of America
Project Censored
SAG-AFTRA
Sexuality Information & Education Council
of the U.S.
Society of Children's Book Writers
& Illustrators
Student Press Law Center
Union for Reform Judaism
Union of Democratic Intellectuals
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ
Office of Communication
United Methodist Church,
United Methodist Communications
Women's American ORT
Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

inseparable from the genocide of native populations and the brutality of slavery. Surely, this counter-narrative is disturbing, even painful, but destroying the murals will not change the realities of historical violence, on the contrary, it will continue the tradition of suppressing and whitewashing them. As one student writes, “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.” (“STUDENT OPINION: Should School Murals That Depict an Ugly History Be Removed?” *The New York Times* challenge to students, April 15, 2019).

We strongly urge you to consider how destroying of these murals would wipe out not just a reminder of American history, but a reminder of how contested its retelling has been. Exhibiting textbooks from the 1930s, and even much more recent ones, next to the murals would help students understand that history itself is often told to support those in power and erase those who were victimized. Ironically, removing the murals so as to protect the feelings of some viewers may only succeed in keeping slave owning George Washington on his historical pedestal and keep covered the genocidal core of the myth of Manifest Destiny.

The district must not destroy artworks in response to the heightened political tensions of the moment. Art often invites strong emotions and multiple complex interpretations. If we were to remove every artwork that disturbs someone, we would significantly impoverish our public sphere.

We are happy to offer further assistance as needed.

Best regards,



Joy Garnett
 Arts Advocacy Associate
 National Coalition Against Censorship

Cc:

Tom DeCaigny Director of Cultural Affairs c/o Sharon Page Ritchie, Commission Secretary Sharon.Page_Ritchie@sfgov.org	Kate Patterson Director of Communications Kate.Patterson@sfgov.org
Stevon Cook, President StevonCook@sfusd.edu	Susan Saunders, Principal GW High School saunderss1@sfusd.edu
Mark Sanchez, Vice President MarkSanchez@sfusd.edu	Erin Lynch, Assistant Principal lynche@sfusd.edu

<p>Alison M. Collins, Commissioner AlisonMCollins@sfusd.edu</p>	<p>Paul Fan, Assistant Principal fanp@sfusd.edu</p>
<p>Gabriela López, Commissioner GabrielaLopez@sfusd.edu</p>	<p>John Schlauraff, Assistant Principal schlauraffj@sfusd.edu</p>
<p>Faauga Moliga, Commissioner FaaugaMoliga@sfusd.edu</p>	<p>George Washington High School Alumni Association murals@sfgwhsalumni.org</p>
<p>Rachel Norton, Commissioner RachelNorton@sfusd.edu</p>	<p>Lope Yap Jr. Vice President, GWHS Alumni Association moreinfo@eccentricpix.com</p>
<p>Esther V. Casco, Executive Assistant to the Board of Education cascoe@sfusd.edu</p>	<p>Gentle Blythe Chief Communications Officer BlytheG@sfusd.edu</p>