

CENSORSHIP NEWS



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-Chris Finan
NCAC Executive Director

WHAT HIDES BENEATH

The heightened political tensions of the present moment have led to a thorough examination of our public space. NCAC welcomes that development. But often we see the urge to “protect” cited as justification for censorship. While the current debates over public space may seem new, the use of censorship as protection—particularly of young people—is most certainly not.

Whom does censorship really protect? And from what? Those who would remove LGBTQ stories from schools suggest that students should be shielded from acknowledging the existence of diverse expressions of gender and sexuality. And others who call for the removal of political artworks that do not whitewash the violence of US history may only succeed in hiding, once again, the dark underside of the myth of Manifest Destiny and of American history in general. The very telling of history has always been contested.

Many have commented on the controversial murals at George Washington High School in San Francisco, in the media, at school board meetings, in community spaces and international news outlets. We asked the people who see these murals every day, GWHS students—the ones that others want to protect—to weigh in (see page four). Like all communities, opinions at GWHS are divided. But the students are eager to be heard, to engage in debate, to think creatively. We should welcome that.

SHORT TAKES

Idaho High School Bans *The Walking Dead*

A junior/senior high school in Silverton, Idaho, has banned the popular graphic novel series *The Walking Dead* and removed all copies from their library, despite the review committee's recommendation to keep the books. The ban includes asking students not to bring the comic onto school grounds and plans to change students' access to interlibrary loans.

NCAC's Kids' Right to Read Project joined forces with the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, National Council of Teachers of English, American Booksellers Association, Authors Guild and PEN America to urge the Superintendent to reverse this decision and reaffirm the district's commitment to free expression by respecting the recommendations of the review committee.

Georgia City Pulls Play Sponsorship

The city of Carrollton, Georgia, pulled its sponsorship from a production of *Calendar Girls* scheduled to run at a city-owned venue because of the play's references to nudity (and despite no actual stage nudity). NCAC and the Dramatists Legal Defense Fund (DLDF) intervened. Ultimately, an anonymous donor stepped in to fund the production, which was performed in August. Public theater should not depend solely on the generosity of private citizens.

Texas Library Disinvites Trans Author

Citing brand new and never-before-implemented policies, city officials in Leander, Texas, abruptly cancelled a visit from renowned graphic novelist Lilah Sturges at the public library just hours before her scheduled appearance. After NCAC intervention, the policies have been adjusted. Sturges' visit may be rescheduled, but NCAC continues to monitor the situation.

California Artist Turns Censorship Into Art

Artist Christy Chan created a public art piece to give voice to residents of Richmond, California, one of the state's most diverse communities. Shortly before her installation, *Inside Out*, was to open, city officials blocked the inclusion of statements critical of the current president of the United States. In order to save the project, Chan obliged and added a disclaimer to the projection reading: "The city of Richmond has banned us from projecting phrases you submitted that criticize the President of the United States by name. Of the 1,100 phrases submitted many have shown viewpoints on the president in both English and Spanish." Following that text, six statements appear blocked out by red bars.

She posted the censored statements to her website at www.insideoutrichmond.org/censorship

WE THE NIPPLE



Photo credit: Fay Fox

To raise awareness about the effects of art censorship on Facebook and Instagram, artist-photographer Spencer Tunick, in collaboration with NCAC's Arts Advocacy Program, created a public art action in June 2019. 125 nude bodies took a stance in the streets of New York City. More at <https://ncac.org/wethenipple>

THE SAN FRANCISCO MURAL CONTROVERSY

In June, the San Francisco Unified School District voted to remove 1930s Works Progress Administration (WPA) murals at George Washington High School. The murals, created in fresco by social-realist painter Victor Arnautoff, can only be removed by destroying them. Two of the thirteen murals have drawn heavy criticism for their depictions of black slaves and Native Americans.

Arnautoff, a Russian-born Communist, included critiques of Washington in his murals at a time when Washington's position as a slave owner and disregard for Native Americans were largely ignored.

Complaints about the murals first arose in the 1960s, leading the school to commission works from artist Dewey Crumpler to offer positive imagery of people of color.

Critics argue that students, particularly black and Native American students, are traumatized by these images of the historical violence and oppression of their ancestors, and that walking past them at school everyday reinforces systemic racism.

Advocates for the murals maintain that this art must be considered in its historical and social context and that arguments for removal do not give students enough credit for their ability to grapple with complexity. NCAC has joined arts advocates in urging school officials to use the murals as the educational tools for which they were intended and to look for creative ways forward.

In August, the School District voted to reverse their decision to destroy the murals, but continues to insist they be hidden from students.

The future of the murals remains in question.



Detail of Victor Arnautoff, *The Life of George Washington* (1934).
Screenshot from GWHS Alumni Assn SF CA on YouTube.

PERSPECTIVES

Excerpted from gregsholette.tumblr.com (posted July 7, 2019, reprinted with permission)

"A dead Indian at Washington's feet, or enslaved African Americans harvesting wheat on his plantation, are not careless racial stereotypes but accurate, carefully chosen and artfully rendered images of history as it was by an artist with the guts to deliver it. Sparing one's child from harsh realities of American history as embodied in an 80-year-old government-sponsored school mural, history in which their ancestors may have been participants, in an era when children are immersively exposed to truly offensive negative racial stereotypes on television and elsewhere—seems breathtakingly off the mark."

—Alan Michelson, artist and Mohawk member of the Six Nations of the Grand River

"For me, this is more of a question of who gets to tell this story. Isn't it possible that instead of preserving and apologizing for this mural, we could use this as an opportunity to tell a new story with new authors? ... Isn't this the nature of public art and public spaces, which are always in flux and always contested? Schools are not museums, they are fluid spaces where everything (...) should be challenged."

—Tomie Arai, public artist and co-founder of The Chinatown Art Brigade

"The mural can be preserved, and it can also stand as anti-racist monument in the right context and framing. What's required here is dialogue with stakeholders at the table with no predetermined outcomes and conditions.

Perhaps they can make something that's called the Garden of Our Miseries and in it the removed murals are contextualized and activated. Moving beyond this binary is important to effective work and to make it do what needs to be done."

—Amin Husain and Natasha Dhillon, co-founders of Decolonize this Place

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TRUTH IS COMPLICATED

Lía Sánchez, Rowan Francis Taylor and Dava Munyon, *George Washington High School students*

Within this past year, our school, George Washington High School, has been subject to national media attention because of a controversy that dates back to 1968. This controversy surrounds a mural at the entrance of our school, appropriately entitled “Life of Washington”, by muralist Victor Arnautoff. It depicts Washington’s life in four distinct parts. The controversy comes when you take a closer look, where you can clearly see slaves working in cotton fields, packing wares into large burlap sacks, and being both overlooked and ordered around by Washington. On another wall of the mural you can see Native Americans being attacked by pioneers and vice versa. But, perhaps the most troubling and controversial part of this mural is the depiction of a Native American man lying dead on the ground. Taken out of context, and even in it, it’s a stark and brutal image. For decades, this mural has been subject to criticism, outrage, protests, and most recently, an emotionally-charged decision as to whether or not it will be permanently painted over and removed from the halls.

We think that by removing these murals, the school board is setting a very dangerous precedent for the removal of art that may seem controversial or offensive. This is a form of censorship that may appear harmless, but its implications may be bigger than we think. In this debate, people seem to say that those who want the mural destroyed are “too sensitive,” and those who want to keep the mural in place are supporting racism. However, this controversy is not black and white.

Throughout history, Washington has been placed on a pedestal by a majority of America as the “Father of His Country,” an unquestionably positive figure. Victor Arnautoff tried to portray George Washington’s life with authenticity, which is probably what Arnautoff wanted students to take from the mural. The real question that we should be asking is how to improve the conversations surrounding Washington and other historical figures like him. Will removing the mural help this conversation or end it? We feel that we should keep the murals, and let them serve as a reminder that America’s founding was not as untroubled as some may believe, and as many history books suggest.

We want the murals to be kept, and taken as learning opportunities. The murals can create

significant experiential education for students to examine the too-often-ignored Native American genocide and African American slavery that helped build this country into what it is. These historical truths are not integrated enough into our school curriculum, even though we have these murals surrounding us every day.

There could be a required assembly—every year, for all students—where students can learn about the realities the murals depict. There should be some kind of visible dedication or message that clearly explains the context in which these murals were painted and why they are still so important today. We could have guest speakers from historically-oppressed communities educate students on these under-taught events in history and how they still affect our lives today. Additionally, we could integrate the murals into our US History curriculum. We must acknowledge that the events depicted in this mural are a part of American history and talk about George Washington, in truthful, complicated, non-Eurocentric ways.

We need to find a compromise, where all parties involved can be truly heard. There will be people who are unsatisfied no matter what becomes of the murals. However, there is a possibility of finding a middle ground.

SF BOARD SHOULDN'T BE A REGIME THAT DESTROYS ART

Svetlana Mintcheva, NCAC’s Director of Programs
Excerpted from The San Francisco Chronicle

Art has been the sacrificial victim of many religious or political upheavals. Periods of iconoclasm have seen images destroyed on a massive scale to eradicate their symbolic power.

Contemporary democracies — perhaps to distinguish themselves from 20th-century totalitarian regimes — have generally condemned destroying art as a political tactic. But over the last four years, calls for the destruction of art have swept across the country with a frequency that may signal a fundamental ideological shift.

Many of these now-controversial works were produced as part of the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project, and were criticized at the time as too left-leaning. Today, WPA works are being condemned for injuring the people whose oppression they portray. In that view, neither historical significance nor artistic value compensates for human pain, especially when that pain affects those who have been on the receiving end of violence and abuse.

Until the GWHS decision, controversies over public murals have led to creative compromises. But San Francisco school officials have rejected such solutions. They appear to agree with the activists opposed to the murals that destruction would constitute a “public recognition of the suffering” of indigenous groups.

PUBLIC DEBATE

“YOU KEEP THOSE SLAVES ON THAT WALL!! That’s how you sound trying to push this falsehood about how this mural is the truth about ‘our’ history. Any real student of history knows black people in America have contributed and endured much more than the images of them holding corn depict. We also know the cultural richness of Native Americans deserves more attention than their painted dead bodies being a consequence of Washington and early colonists establishing the American Empire.”

—**Stevon Cook, President of the San Francisco Unified School District board, from *The San Francisco Examiner***

“I view Arnautoff’s murals, as they were for me, as a reminder of the horrors of human bondage and the mistreatment of native peoples, even by the father of our country. To destroy them or block them from view would be akin to book burning. We would be missing the opportunity for enhanced historic introspection this moment has provided us.”

—**Actor Danny Glover, George Washington High School graduate**

“To cover [the murals] in any way prevents them from being used in the manner intended...as teaching tools. It also bears the question of what art or written word would be next.”
Destroying the murals would be “to deny our past and to fail our students.”

—**Senator Dianne Feinstein in a letter to Stevon Cook**