

Erasing murals won't change history

Subversive art merits critique, not reactionary whitewashing

By Charles Desmarais

I have on my desk an invitation to the exhibition "Striking Power: Iconoclasm in Ancient Egypt," currently on view at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis. The show is said to be the first to propose answers to the question its lead curator, Edward Bleiberg, says he is most often asked about Egyptian sculpture.

Why are the noses broken?

The answer, it turns out, is generally not that the sculptures suffered some accident. In traditions going back as far as 6,000 years, art was purposely defaced to erase memory and consolidate power, to delegitimize the leaders and desecralize the gods of former eras.

Today, as our culture reconsiders long-held tenets of public art, we find ourselves in a moment of reckoning with our own past, no longer content to wait patiently as the record of our changing world catches up to what we aspire to be. The latest local news on that front is the effort, reported today by Chronicle staff writers Jill Tucker and Gwendolyn Wu, to obliterate a 1936 mural by the celebrated San Francisco artist Victor Arnautoff.



Yalonda M. James / The Chronicle

San Francisco school officials will decide whether to destroy or keep the historic mural depicting racist images at George Washington High School.

The massive fresco painting, commissioned by the federal Works Progress Administration for the entrance lobby at George Washington

High School, depicts our first president at several stages of his life. It includes what the school board president judges to be "really harmful" images of enslaved black people and an apparently dead Native American.

Never mind that Arnautoff was a committed leftist, and that any careful reading of the mural would reveal those passages to be a particularly brave

critique, in the 1930s, of aspects of the Washington myth. Never mind that it is a superb example of a nearly lost art

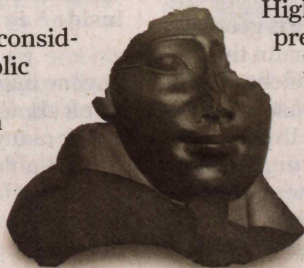
» **Debate flares:** History and racism collide in George Washington High School murals depicting injustices. **A1**

form — the Renaissance fresco technique of pigments applied to wet plaster — by the artist who oversaw the work on the famed murals at Coit Tower, among many other projects.

Some people just want it gone. Like the Egyptian leader Thutmose III, who disfigured sculptures so that his people would forget the woman who was a pharaoh — his stepmother Hatshepsut — they hope to change the past by untelling its story.

There are cases when the symbolism of destruction can be seen as a good thing. Tearing stone Nazi swastikas from buildings after World War II was certainly a satisfying activity for U.S.

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Brooklyn Museum

"Face and Shoulder from an Anthropoid Sarcophagus"

Subversive art worth preserving

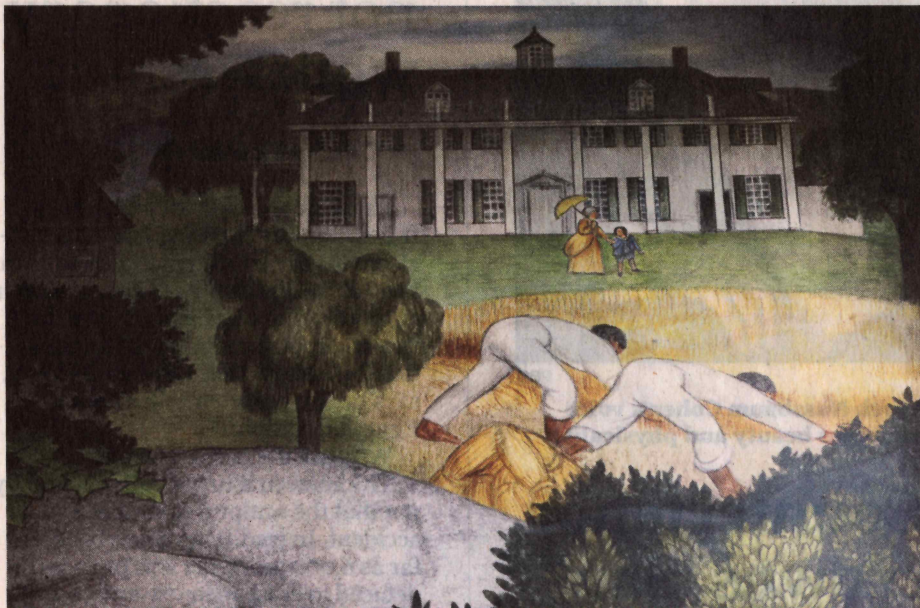
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troops. Ditto, for many Iraqis, the toppling of Saddam Hussein statues in 2003.

In this country, monuments to the Confederacy are often bald racism posing as art. They often had less to do with memorializing the Civil War than undercutting the gains of the civil rights movement. The grandest of them all, Georgia's Stone Mountain, is carved into a rock at the site of the founding of the Ku Klux Klan; it was dedicated precisely on the 100th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's assassination.

But if there is good reason to disrupt the purposeful celebration of white supremacy, there is also cause to think through our urge to blot out every potentially offensive image.

An original work of art is not merely the expression of an idea, translatable into words or reproducible in a photograph. It is itself a unique presence in the world, one that can be described, perhaps, but ultimately independent from what



Yalonda M. James / The Chronicle

Images of oppression, painted by artist Victor Arnautoff in his 1936 fresco inside San Francisco's Washington High School, have sparked controversy.

anyone might say or think about it.

For many, that untranslatable element is art's most fearsome power. Last week, the Legion of Honor opened a new exhibition of the work of Peter Paul Rubens. The show's organizers remind us, in just the second paragraph of the thick catalog, of the virulent (if wonderfully named) Iconoclastic Furies of the 16th century, when mobs

across Europe invaded Catholic churches to destroy religious art.

The followers of Thutmose, we are told, broke the nose of Hatshepsut's statue because they thought that would keep the spirit inside from breathing. For such believers, the meaning of a work is not a product of our experience of it, but something magically hidden within.

Victor Arnautoff's

subversive Washington mural tells a story with some shocking details about the high school's namesake. If no one is arguing these are untrue, how can we say the fault lies in the painting?

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfcchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1 Free weekly newsletter: <http://bit.ly/ArtguyReviews>