

Protecting art as our obligation

When the San Francisco Board of Education voted last month to censor the 1936 mural cycle "Life of Washington," it tried to do so with a minimum of public attention. Earlier this month, as hundreds streamed up the entry stairway of George Washington High School to take advantage of a quietly announced, two-hour opportunity to view the fresco, it was clear that the strategy had failed.

The work, by the celebrated artist Victor Arnautoff, is an artistic treasure that was not widely known before the board action. People don't think first of public schools as art venues, and in recent years the concern for student safety has led to stringent security protocols that would keep them away if they did.

Now, in the middle of a workday with less than 48 hours' notice, citizens dropped their normal activities to ... engage with art? I have never seen any museum exhibition generate more intense looking, more discussion than this impromptu art viewing.

The outpouring of concern that day, added to weeks of local and national outrage coming from all corners of the art and education professions, seems to have led to a modified school board proposal to "remove (the mural) from public view" by permanently covering it — a less drastic



Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Doo Doo Mon Inyah Injah (left) and Alice Mosley view the 1936 mural by San Francisco artist Victor Arnautoff at George Washington High School.

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move than destroying it, but equally censorial.

As important as the Arnautoff murals are, the issues raised by the attempt to destroy them are larger than this single controversy. They

have to do with what I think of as a kind of cultural duty of care — with the avoidance of negligence or harm to works of art maintained by an organization for the public good.

At least two other recent Bay Area events, though very different from censorship controversies, revolve around the same central question: What obligations do our cultural and education leaders have to protect our heritage?

One, a hopeful sign, is the restraint and focus embodied by the 500 Capp Street Foundation's decision to prioritize care for a great work of art, even if it means trimming a popular program.

The other case is an example of
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Grappling with the obligation to protect art

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extreme administrative myopia. A rare and decades-old collection of Northern California art may be put on the block by a public institution, Napa's di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art, merely to fund short-term needs.

There are objects in the world that transcend their material components. An heirloom in one family might be just a cheap teapot to anyone else; a photograph is a sheet with some marks on it — it is not your son or your mother. Yet people have been known to risk fire or flood to save what they might call “fragments of their lives,” as if their soulful selves were pieced together of ceramic and paper bits. So it is with entire cultures.

The art museum had its start as the place where we guard the relics (a word originally used to describe the body parts of saints) of our changing understanding of ourselves, the objects that tell the stories of our lives. Like religious relics, these are objects we preserve and also venerate.

Which brings me to the announcement by the di Rosa Center that it plans to sell off most of the 1,600 works of art in its fabled collection, and use the proceeds for programs it says are currently starved for support.

It is a plan that tries to have it all ways, justified by hair-splitting distinctions between the center and its umbrella foundation, both run by the very same people. Di Rosa alternately claims that it is not a collecting entity because it has not purchased art in recent years; insists that it can't take proper care of the art it has; and promises to maintain a “legacy collection” of 200 to 400 works. Like-

ly as not, the idiosyncrasy for which the collection is known will be sacrificed for the sake of high-dollar works.

It is a proposal that reeks of opportunism, trumpeted as a solution by a board and director too inept or too lazy to carry out their central responsibilities, seemingly blind to the fact that if they can't balance the books now, an infusion of art-sale proceeds will be burned through eventually and the organization will be back to where it is now.

Di Rosa might well argue that it is not subject to museum standards requiring that so-called “deaccession” sale proceeds be used only to improve the collection, because the center is not an accredited institution. That's a technical out, but not an ethical one. Both the di Rosa's director, Robert Sain, and its collections consultant, Graham Beal, have worked in major U.S. museums. They know the rules and the justifications for them.

The collection has its highs and lows, both artistically and in terms of market value, but that is why it should stay together — its cultural worth is in the aggregate.

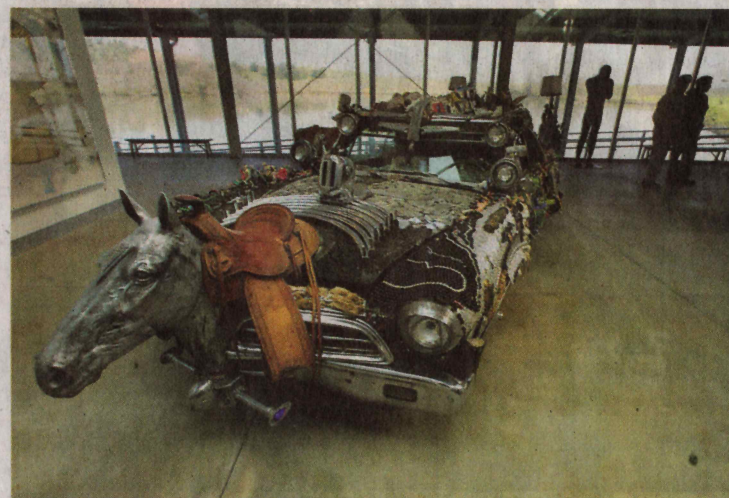
Meanwhile, the contretemps at 500 Capp Street, while immensely upsetting to the individuals whose lives have been disrupted, seems on a far more rational course than destruction or dissolution. The foundation runs the David Ireland House, an extraordinary work of art that Ireland polished and coaxed over 30 years from a simple wood Victorian in the Mission District.

In 2016, after extensive conservation efforts, the foundation opened the fragile environment to the public. Since that



Takashi Fukuda / 500 Capp Street Foundation

The members of the board that runs the David Ireland House at 500 Capp St. in the Mission are cutting back on rotating programs to focus on the primary work of art in their care.



Frederic Larson / The Chronicle 2002

The “Saddle Car” by artist David Best was part of the collection of the late modern-art connoisseur Rene di Rosa.

time, an ambitious series of temporary exhibitions has been developed.

The project has been funded almost entirely by a single benefactor, Carlie Wilmans, and it's safe to say it has cost her millions. Attempts to broaden the donor base have been insufficient.

Wilmans, for her own reasons, has made it clear that she can't or won't continue to fund a reported \$100,000 annual deficit, so the foundation's small board decided to cut back on

rotating programs — one curator was laid off and another quit — to focus on the primary work of art in their care. It is a decision consistent with their first responsibility as trustees: the conservation of an irreplaceable component of the city's cultural fabric.

The idea that public agencies have a legal duty not only to provide services — to, say, keep waterways navigable and airplanes from running into each other — but also to protect resources like open space, clean

water and air is relatively recent. As I understand it, this principle of a public trust is the basis for much of the environmental law that has been developed since the 1970s.

Little such legislation or case law has been developed to protect cultural resources, and probably won't be, but that doesn't mean that the concept is without value. There is at least a moral sense in which the public owns certain rights to such resources, just as we are entitled to a healthy physical environment, regardless of who might hold legal title to a tract of land.

The iconoclasm of the Reformation in Europe, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues by the Taliban — indeed, the impending censorship of “Life of Washington” — are extreme examples, but the violation of the public trust that they represent is clear. The obligation to that trust is no less apparent in the smallest of violations, or the most modest of protections, of our right to our cultural heritage.

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