NEW SCHOOL HISTORIES

The Writing on the Wall

Orozco, Benton, and Arnautoff

September 25, 2019

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By now, most people who care about public art and human rights will have heard about the San Francisco School Board's recent decisions to destroy, and subsequently to cover *The Life of George Washington*, a set of 13 murals painted in 1936 by Victor Arnautoff for George Washington High School. The most disputed sections depict Washington encouraging white settlers in their westward march, over the figure of a dead Native American, and images of Washington' slaves working in the fields of Mount Vernon.

Student and activist groups have campaigned for the removal of the murals, arguing they were detrimental to the education and well-being of students of color, who had to confront these images as they walked the halls or ascended the staircase. On the other side of the debate, art historians and preservationists point to the historic and aesthetic values of the WPA mural. They argue that, unlike statues of Confederate soldiers that celebrate perpetrators of injustice, Arnautoff's murals illustrate the impacts of the country's founding on African Americans and Native Americans and provide opportunities to develop a more nuanced understanding of U.S. history.

The debate over the mural brings to mind a well-known controversy in The New School's past: the censoring of parts of Jose Clemente Orozco's murals in the 1950s in response to political pressures during the Cold War. In 1953 a committee of the Board of Directors announced "the existence of the murals was clearly a divisive element and has caused considerable annoyance," and ordered President Hans Simons to cover the offending section. The circumstances leading up to the decision to place a curtain over Orozco's portraits of Lenin and Stalin have been well documented in the 2014 exhibition Offense + Dissent.

In fact, Orozco's murals and those by Thomas Hart Benton and Orozco, both painted as part of Joseph Urban's new building at 66 W. 12th, had been subject to criticism at the time of their unveiling in 1931. The critiques continued, and in 1943 New School Director Alvin Johnson was prompted to write a pamphlet describing their inception:

> "Each [muralist] was asked to paint a subject he regarded as of such importance that no history written a hundred years from now could fail to devote a chapter to it. Benton chose to depict the tremendous burst of human energy and mechanical power that characterizes the present phase of economic life in America... Orozco chose to depict the revolutionary unrest that smolders in the non-industrial periphery, India, Mexico, Russia."

According to Johnson, the adverse reaction to the Benton murals, while muted, came in two forms: cultural critics lamented the focus on business and industry at the expense of learning and the arts, and the political left faulted Benton's acceptance of the economic status quo. In defense, Johnson notes that "Benton recognizes that modern industrialism rises out of a context of earlier economic forms. The triumphant Negro in the cotton panel must be contrasted with the depressed farmer, the chain gang and the bored and embittered guard with his sawed-off shot gun.... Benton knows that socially, something has to be paid for industrial efficiency. Not all of society can come along, and those left out are rather desolate."

Opposition to the Orozco murals, Johnson wrote, was stronger and primarily political, focusing first on Orozco's depiction of Stalin, and later on that of Gandhi. The*Table of Universal Brotherhood* was also criticized for its equal treatment of figures of all races sitting around the table.

Intriguingly, both Benton and Orozco went on to complete murals at academic institutions shortly after their time at The New School that have given rise to controversies similar to the one George Washington High School is facing. An examination of these shows the enduring challenges faced by public art educational settings and an institution's dual responsibilities to educate and to protect its students forced to confront challenging images.

Orozco's next commission took him to Dartmouth where he completed his ambitious mural cycle, *The Epic of American Civilization* between 1932 and 1934 for the reading room of Baker Library. Its 24 panels highlight the history of America, through the lens of both Indigenous and European roots. On west and east walls, Orozco contrasts scenes of pre-Hispanic and post-conquest society, depicting the cycle of civilization: rise, golden age, and destruction.

Less well known is Dartmouth's second set of murals which then-President Hopkins agreed to appease alumni upset over the political sentiments in Orozco's work. Completed in the late 1930s by alumni Walter Beach Humphrey, the Hovey Murals illustrate "Eleazar Wheelock," a drinking song penned by Richard Hovey in the 1880's satirizing the founding of the college by the Congregationalist minister Wheelock. The mural's four panels illustrate Wheelock offering rum to a group of Native Americans and the inebriation that results. (Dartmouth was founded in part to educate Indian youths.) Half-dressed women and men repose drunkenly in the woods, books abandoned at their feet.

For many years, the Hovey Murals resided in what was the Faculty Dining Room. In the 1970s, when Dartmouth admitted women and reaffirmed its commitment to educating Native American students, it closed the room from view. In early 2018, prompted by renewed student's concerns over the murals' portrayal of Native Americans, President Philip Hanlon created a "Hovey Murals Study Group," which consulted with members of the Dartmouth community, including students, alumni, and faculty who discussed the murals in their classrooms. In their recommendation, they noted that their institutional commitment informed their decision:

> "our institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion, our historic charter commitment to the education of Native American students and our dedication to preserving even offensive artworks for critical examination and research."

In August of 2018, President Hamlin announced the murals would be moved. "The derogatory images in the Hovey murals convey disturbing messages that are incompatible with Dartmouth's mission and values," he wrote. "Moving them off-campus to Hood storage is the right thing to do."

Moving problematic artwork off campus was not an option for the University of Indiana, recently embroiled in a controversy over its own Benton murals. Soon after the completion of New School's *America Today* series, Benton was commissioned by the Indiana State Legislature to paint a set of murals for the state's pavilion at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. Titled *A Social History of Indiana*, the work was composed of two series of 11 panels each, one on industry and one on culture, depicting events from Indiana's history through both social and political lenses.

After the World's Fair, the murals languished for five years at the Indiana State Fairgrounds until they were donated to the university. Sixteen panels were placed in the lobby of a new auditorium (now called the Hall of Murals); four were housed adjacent to the university theater, and the remaining two went to classrooms in the business school.

One of the latter, "Cultural Panel 10," had been the focus of controversy since its unveiling. Like most of Benton's panels, *Parks, the Circus, the Klan, the Press* incorporates a conglomeration of images. The contentious portion lies in the panel's center where a Klan rally with a burning cross is shown in the background, behind an image of a white nurse tending to black and white children in a hospital. In the foreground, a reporter, photographer, and printer commemorate the role of the *Indianapolis Times* in uncovering the influence of the Klan in local politics, ultimately leading to the resignation of the Governor and the Mayor of Indianapolis.

As IU Provost and Executive Vice President, Lauren Robel notes,

> At the time of the mural's creation, many opposed Benton's decision to include the Klan, because they did not want to portray Indiana in a negative light, and the memories of the Klan's political influence were still raw. Benton, however, overcame this opposition and maintained artistic control. He believed that his murals needed to show all aspects of the state's history, even the ugly and discomfiting parts, so we could confront the mistakes of the past.

The recent decisions regarding the mural were prompted by an online petition to remove Culture Panel 10, arguing that the panel violated the university's Freedom from Discrimination policy. In response to the success of the petition and widening criticism, the Provost announced that classes would no longer be scheduled in the room with the mural but that it would remain on view:

"Nor does the notion of covering them with a curtain accord with our responsibility as stewards of this precious art. Covering the murals feels like censorship and runs counter to the expressed intent of the artist to make visible moments in history that some would rather forget. Furthermore, covering the murals during class periods would leave them hidden for the vast majority of the time and create a situation in which the decision to uncover them could be used by some as a symbolic act in support of the very ideology the murals are intended to criticize."

By enacting this compromise, the Provost argued, students would not be forced to view the mural's difficult subject without having an opportunity to discuss and understand its context.

Lack of student choice was also a factor in the New School's discussions over whether to censor Orozco's murals since at the time the room functioned as the school's cafeteria. However, concerns about the symbolism of *uncovering* the mural did not concern Johnson who argued, in 1950, for covering the pictures with "burlap tacked or glued in such a way as to avoid damaging the picture."

The debate raged for several years. In 1953, the alumni of the graduate school passed a resolution stating "the murals on the fifth floor represent propaganda primarily and are inappropriate in a place devoted to science and teaching." Later that year, the Board ordered the murals covered, citing the need to protect the "captive audience"; President Simons decided to curtain the offending wall.

Unlike the recent decisions in Dartmouth and Indiana, the resolution was made *against* the vocal majority of students who objected, saying, "You don't judge a painting by its politics. It's been there for 23 years without proof of its having corrupted anyone." In their protest letter to Board Chair William Davis, the student Committee Against the Curtaining of Murals questioned whether students "feel more captive when [they] have freedom of choice either to look, or not, at the murals ...or, when someone decides for [them] that the mural is not to be viewed."

What constitutes a hostile learning environment has undoubtedly changed over the decades. By the time the curtain came down on Orozco's murals at The New School, the room's function had been changed (an additional concession to criticism) so questions of student audience — whether captive or not — were less pressing. That is not the case in San Francisco where, Paloma Flores, program coordinator for the San Francisco School District's Indian Education Program, argued: "It's not a matter of offense, it's a matter of the right to learn without a hostile environment... Intent does not negate lived experience."

Educational institutions, of course, have their mandates. However, as Roberta Smith notes in her recent defense of the Arnautoff murals in the *New York Times*, people's responses to art inevitably change over time. She posits that "future generations [may] find the opposition to Arnautoff's murals actions quaint, presumptuous or infuriating."

Perhaps the best way to address a challenging mural is in the same genre. Smith suggests the school board could commission some "response murals," as it did in the 1970s the last time strong opposition to the Arnautoff murals emerged. Dewey Crumpler's *Multi-Ethnic Heritage: Black Asian, Native/Latin-American* depicts students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and is, like the Arnautoff murals, inspired by the work of Orozco and other Mexican muralists. Crumpler supports preserving the Arnautoff murals; however, he acknowledges "I can see how the image of the dead Native American on the ground would be very difficult for a young person in today's contentious environment, having trouble reconciling with art." He argues:

> "Students today have different readings of metaphors than we did in the previous century. Freedom of speech and art were linked as markers of progress and enlightenment. I think the lack of arts education in the schools has contributed to this lack of understanding. If you whitewash that mural, it will only bleed in history more powerfully than it bleeds right now."

Arnautoff and Crumpler's murals currently sit in dialogue with each other at George Washington High School. Smith suggests a theme for a new commission, proposed by Stevon Cook, President of the San Francisco Board of Education: a history of the 5000 African-Americans who fought in the American Revolutionary War.

These cases, historical and contemporary, show the particular challenges of public art which balance artistic expressions with political identities. As the San Francisco School Board grapples with the public response to its decision, it could take a lesson from The New School's recent response to its own artwork. The 2010 exhibit Re-imagining Orozco, curated by Silvia Rocciolo and Eric Stark, was both a celebration of Orozco's murals as well as an opportunity to reexamine them as a platform for sociopolitical art. Mexican-American artist Enrique Chagoya was commissioned to create drawings in response to Orozco's work, and members of the New School community were invited to participate. Among the responses was an animation that re-imagined Orozco's *Table of Universal*

Brotherhood 2010, first as a Table of Sisterhood and then as a networked complex of leaders of all nationalities and occupations. Its reflection on the intractability of modern problems as well as the necessity of ongoing communal efforts to solve them mirrors Orozco's Complicated relationship to the ideas of human progress. The Arnautoff murals are ripe for a similar conversation.

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Keywords: Art, Education, History, New York City, The New School

Related Names: Alvin Johnson, José Clemente Orozco, Thomas Hart Benton, Victor Arnautoff

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