

SF school board reverses course, decides to save controversial mural

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Facing an international outcry, thousands of emails and celebrity opposition to the June decision to destroy a historic school **mural**, the San Francisco school board reversed course Tuesday, voting to obscure the art with panels or similar materials rather than painting over it.

The decision, in a 4-3 vote, means the mural depicting George Washington's life would survive, but be obscured, at least semi-permanently, from public view.

The compromise was a disappointment to both sides in the debate, with **critics** saying the art was an outdated **relic** and **preservationists** saying the removal from public view is **censorship**. The tense meeting included yelling and hissing, as well as accusations of racism and ignorance.

The **controversy** over the large mural at George Washington High School centers on parts of the **frescoes** depicting slavery and white settlers stepping over a dead Native American.

Critics of the mural, including current and former students as well as parents, say the images are offensive and disturbing, and something students shouldn't have to see everyday.

Mural preservationists say the images depict history and that destroying them amounts to censorship.

Following the June vote, mural supporters vowed to take the issue to the courts and to voters to save the art

School board President Stevon Cook said prior to Tuesday's meeting that he wanted to bring the issue back for another vote after hearing "much more input from the public" in recent weeks. "I think we all agree that the mural depicts a history of the country that's hard to see," he said.

Cook said he has always supported obscuring the mural rather than destroying it, although he voted to paint over it in June.

The outcry against the initial decision included academics, artists, museum officials and the NAACP, as well as celebrities, including actor Danny Glover, who attended Washington High in the early 1960s and said the mural's images reflected the need to be active during the civil rights movement.

Glover said in a news conference prior to the meeting that art should make people uncomfortable, especially art that tells the truth. He noted that he's made several films that made people uncomfortable, including "The Color Purple."

"Why board it up?" he said. "Why can't we tell the truth?"

Glover said destroying the mural, or covering it, was "absurd" and a "tragedy."

Yet mural critics lambasted the board's new decision, saying that **indigenous** and black youth experience **trauma** when they look at the mural — and that a school is not a museum, which they said is the appropriate place for controversial art.

"I remember not having the emotional capacity in me to look up at the "Life of Washington" mural in my freshman year," said Kai Anderson-Lawson, an indigenous student at the school. "The mural is very hard to look at due to the fact that it paints my people as victims."

The controversy isn't about art, it's about the pain of students, said Amy Anderson, a parent at the school.

“It’s very harmful to the students,” she said. “We need to paint it down.”

Cook and board members Rachel Norton, Jenny Lam and Faauuga Moliga voted to **obscure** the mural from view. Alison Collins, Mark Sanchez and Gabriela Lopez voted against it.

“This mural is not historic. It is a relic,” Collins said prior to the vote. “It is a remnant from a bygone era.”

The 1936 frescoes, painted on wet plaster, are the work of Russian artist Victor Arnautoff, and part of the Works Progress Administration public art program under President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal employment projects. The 1,600-square-foot “Life of Washington” mural features multiple panels with scenes from the life of the first president.

Cook, who as president sets the board’s agenda, said the vote Tuesday was the final decision by the board regarding the mural — at least as long as he’s president through December. He also said he would not allow any votes on other murals in schools, including Depression-era frescoes depicting missionaries at Mission High.

It’s unclear following the vote whether mural supporters would continue to pursue a ballot measure that would preserve the mural for public viewing.

Jon Golinger, executive director of the Coalition to Protect Public Art, said the vote Tuesday offers some breathing room for the organization to decide what to do next.

“This is not a compromise,” he said.

In the meantime, the district will initiate the official process to cover the mural with panels or a similar solution that prevents the students and public from seeing them. The process includes an analysis of various options to meet the board’s decision to conceal the mural. The cost of covering the murals with acoustic panels initially was estimated in June at \$875,000 versus \$600,000 to paint it over.

“We have said many, many times that schools need to be a place where students feel safe,” said board member Norton. “I believe students should not be forced to view images at school that make them feel that way. For now, I think covering permanently the murals is the best course of actions.”

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