



GEORGE WASHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL

“LIFE OF WASHINGTON” MURAL

TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS, BUILDING CONSENSUS, RESOURCES

(Submitted to SFUSD on 4.17.19, updated 7.16.19)

Over the past year, [San Francisco Heritage](http://www.sfheritage.org) (Heritage) has been researching examples of comparable mural and public art controversies across the country and solutions prescribed for addressing objectionable and offensive imagery. Heritage commissioned the City Landmark nomination for George Washington High School, co-authored by Donna Graves and Christopher VerPlanck, which comprehensively documents the school’s public art and architecture, including Victor Arnautoff’s “Life of Washington” (1936) mural. Heritage is closely following the public process concerning the “Life of Washington” mural, having attended three of the four Reflection and Action Group meetings convened by the school district in early 2019. Regardless of Arnautoff’s original intent, we recognize the offensive nature of the mural’s depictions and their impact on students, especially students of color. Our goal in compiling this memo is to provide a range of technical options for consideration by district officials in order to facilitate a constructive and unifying solution.

George Washington High School is the latest in a series of controversies surrounding depictions of Native Americans, African Americans, and other historical events locally and nationally – frequently involving New Deal-era artworks. Although each case must be considered in its own context, taking into account the intent of the artist and how the imagery is experienced by contemporary viewers, there have been a range of creative approaches to remedying inaccurate, offensive, and/or stereotypical content in public art. All of the cases profiled below combine multiple responses to address the controversial historical depictions, including screening, interpretation, education, and/or new artwork to provide a contemporary perspective. Notably, we have not come across any cases where the “solution” called for whitewashing or destruction of the artwork.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REVERSIBILITY

One of the guiding principles of conservation of cultural heritage is the idea of reversibility, that all interventions with the object should be fully reversible and that the object should be able to be returned to the state in which it was prior to the conservator’s intervention. “Reversibility” in preservation work maintains the option of being able to reestablish the previous condition by opting for “more harmless” solutions and avoiding irreversible interventions. This concept is also a central tenet of federal rehabilitation standards for historic buildings. With all intervention measures on a work of art, such as the Arnautoff frescoes, the materials that are introduced should be examined regarding their relative reversibility, including the feasibility of implementing the prescribed “antidote” to return the artwork to its original condition. As illustrated in the General Services Administration’s approach to the “Dangers of the Mail” mural in Washington, D.C., profiled below, reversibility is a key consideration in evaluating whether changes to a

historic resource result in an adverse effect, whether under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act or CEQA.

REFLECTION & ACTION GROUP RECOMMENDATION: PAINTING OVER

To address concerns over offensive depictions in “The Life of Washington” mural, the majority recommendation of the Reflection and Action Group, dated February 28, 2019, simply states: “Paint white paint over all panels of the ‘Life of Washington’ mural located in lobby before the first day of 2019-2020 school year.” It should be emphasized that, over the course of its four meetings in early 2019, the Reflection and Action Group was not formally presented with a range of technical options for screening, recontextualizing, relocating, and/or removing the murals.

As observed by professional art conservator Will Shank, who conducted a site visit to GWHS on March 7, 2019, “the surface of *buon fresco* painting is intrinsically porous, and it will absorb any liquid coating applied to it. (Frescoes are not traditionally varnished like canvas paintings.) There is no ‘reversible’ liquid material that can be applied over a fresco in order to obliterate it. Another paint layer will sink into the interstices of the carefully prepared surface and into the grooves that separate one *giornata* [amount that can be painted in a day while the plaster remains wet] from the ones around it. It cannot be reversed completely in the future.” In his view, “overpainting would be an act of vandalism.”¹

REMOVAL / RELOCATION

Although it is theoretically possible to remove and relocate the Arnautoff mural panels, such techniques are very seldom used and would likely be prohibitively expensive. As explained by Will Shank, who currently resides in Barcelona and practices conservation throughout Europe:

The [Arnautoff] paintings were created in the traditional *buon fresco* style of the Italian Renaissance, which was revived by Rivera and his contemporaries, and picked up as a difficult-to-handle medium by the WPA artists of the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. This technique requires the artist or her/his assistants to apply a patch of wet plaster directly onto a solid subsurface, and to apply pigments suspended in water onto the plaster before it dries. The surface area that the artist can cover in one day is called a *giornata*, and the junctures between these areas of plaster can easily be detected decades later. The paint thus becomes part of the wall. It is not easy, but not impossible, to remove frescoes from the wall on which they were painted. Usually one of two techniques is used, and this happens only in dire circumstances which usually result from structural problems in the wall itself, or the threat of demolition to the building on which the fresco is painted.

The two methods are called *strappo* and *stacco*. Both of them are violent techniques of either hammering away, or tearing away, the top layer of plaster from the rest of the wall behind it. Once the painted plaster is removed, another support must be identified to attach it to.

¹ Shank, Will. “Conservation Observations Regarding Victor Arnautoff’s Life of Washington Frescoes,” March 13, 2019.

According to the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the “detachment and transfer are dangerous, drastic and irreversible operations that severely affect the physical composition, material structure, and aesthetic characteristics of wall paintings. These operations are, therefore, only justifiable in extreme cases when all options of *in situ* treatment are not viable.” In addition, both forms of detachment break the intrinsic link between wall paintings and architecture; causing irreversible physical damage to the texture, topography, and tone of the painting. They also leave a void in the stripped interior.

Neither of these techniques is advisable in the case of the George Washington murals. The complex twelve-part mural is highly site-specific, and there is no justifiable reason to incur the enormous expense and extreme effort required to physically remove them from their original location. There is also the final matter of their ultimate destination, a question with no obvious answer.²

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SCREENING

As stated in testimony by public historian Donna Graves at the March 6, 2018 School Board meeting, Heritage has long supported a solution that would “conceal the [offensive depictions] in a way that allows people to choose to view it, and to find interpretation that explains why it is hidden, offers a path forward that is consistent with an educational setting. This could take the form of a screen suspended on wires running from ceiling to floor that can be pulled aside — or vertical doors attached to the floor that can be swung open. Both of these preliminary ideas leave the rest of the mural visually accessible. They can also incorporate text that explains the objections to the image, the ways that Native Americans historically have been erased or misrepresented, and the fact that Native peoples still live in San Francisco.” The GWHS Alumni Association concurs with and expounds on Heritage’s statement, having proposed “a combination of solutions to address the concerns raised,” including:

- Screen the two panels in question to prevent inadvertent viewing, a solution used in a similar situation in Washington, D.C.
- Place interpretive panels to describe the murals' intent and how they have been experienced by Native American, African American, and other students of color, as has been done in a similar situation in New York.
- Develop a site-specific curriculum on contemporary issues related to the Native American experience.
- Create new murals in prominent locations with positive portrayals of Native Americans including San Francisco’s Ramaytush Yelamu Ohlone tribe.

If the content of the frescoes is to be obscured from view, a physical means of covering them over must be devised. According to Will Shank, such a system could take the form of the Dewey Crumpler murals adjacent to the Arnautoff frescoes (pictured below); these appear to be painted wooden/Masonite panels set into frames and adhered to the wall. Other types of material could

² Id.



be considered in order to cover—and protect—the frescoes, including lightweight panels like foamcore or honeycomb panels with cardboard or aluminum cladding. In either case, school district should hire a technician familiar with the installation of such materials, working under the guidance of a conservator, with the goal of covering the frescoes without (1) making holes in the paintings, or (2) adhering anything directly onto the painted surfaces. The least invasive, and most reversible, solution would be to devise a system of fabric coverings. These could hang like draperies, or be stretched and attached with a system of grommets or other devices. Such a system would similarly need to be carefully fabricated so as to not penetrate, or adhere to, the painted surface. As referenced above, the key aspect of an acceptable solution to the problem is reversibility, so that the frescoes can once again be exposed intact if and when their circumstances change in the future. A qualified local conservator can help devise such a system and to attach it professionally and safely.

CASE STUDY: Christopher Columbus Murals at Notre Dame University (Removable Screening, Digital Imaging, Off-Site Interpretation)

In an analogous controversy involving a dozen Christopher Columbus murals inside the main building at the University of Notre Dame, the administration recently decided on “a course that will preserve the murals, but will not display them regularly in their current location.” Specifically, the murals will be covered with a “woven material” that will allow them to be displayed on occasion. A permanent display of high-resolution images of them will be placed elsewhere on campus. Although a [brochure](#) explaining the events depicted in the murals has been available to passersby since the 1990s, the hallway is so highly trafficked that “it is not well suited for a thoughtful consideration of these paintings and the context of their composition,” wrote university president Rev. John I. Jenkins in a [statement to the campus community](#) on January 20, 2019.

Painted by Luigi Gregori from 1882-84 on walls in the ceremonial entrance, the murals “reflect the attitudes of the time and were intended as a didactic presentation, responding to cultural challenges for the school’s largely immigrant, Catholic population.” However, Rev. Jenkins explained, “many have come to see the murals as at best blind to the consequences of Columbus’s voyage for the indigenous peoples who inhabited this ‘new’ world and at worst demeaning toward them.”

In response to the university’s decision, Dr. Cheryl Crazy Bull, president of the American Indian College Fund, advocated for a broader discussion about the visibility and public perception of indigenous people – a focus of the [Reclaiming Native Truth](#) project established in 2016 by the First Nations Development Institute (discussed below at p.9).³ Although she agrees that the Notre Dame murals are offensive, removing them “gives people who committed the acts and continue to victimize people of color permission to be indignant, or to pretend that covering them up fixes it. There was a time when I would have said, ‘You know what, cover those up.’ But

³ “Observers to Notre Dame: Act Wisely with Columbus Murals,” *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, February 1, 2019. See <https://diverseeducation.com/article/137698/>

now I feel an institution ought to make a significant investment in the educational opportunity that those murals represent. What the Reclaiming Native Truth initiative learned was that if you help people see the truth, they change their minds about how to support indigenous rights and tribal sovereignty.”

Dr. Crazy Bull urged Notre Dame to “step up with a much stronger educational program around what those murals represent. Why not have a lecture series and bring in people who can talk about those issues, including the doctrine of discovery? That raises the visibility. And work on curriculum with some area schools that brings it into K-12 education, which our initiative shows is a game-changer. Attitudes and oppressive policies still exist, and Notre Dame probably has issues to address around indigenous people and people of color, if they are honest with themselves. Link that together and address it.”

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CASE STUDY: “Dangers of The Mail” Mural – Clinton Building, Washington (Removable Screening, Interpretive Program, Web Content, Tours)



The “Dangers of the Mail” mural, by Frank A. Mechau, was installed in 1937 when the building was the headquarters for the U.S. Postal Service. The mural was controversial from the start because it displays nude women being attacked by Indians. In the late 1990s, Native American federal employees led calls to remove the mural due to the offensive depictions amid the backdrop of a public building.

After extensive public consultation with parties expressing many concerns from a range of positions, the General Services Administration (GSA) temporarily screened the mural in place while developing a comprehensive interpretive program that includes all 22 New Deal murals in the building. The three-part program consists of wall-mounted panels adjacent to each of the murals, [web content](#) (including a short essay on “Controversy Then and Now”), and regular public tours (with 30 tours led in 2017 alone).

As a permanent solution, GSA designed and installed a custom-designed curtain in front of the mural. The custom-made curtain is made of a “durable, high-quality, fluid-moving metal mesh

material designed to be opened and closed by visitors so that the mural could be viewed along with its pendent mural in the lobby and in the context of other murals as originally intended.” The curtain is mounted to the flat plaster wall by two custom-fabricated curved walls running the horizontal length of the mural and located above and below the mural frame. The curtain material provides the required opacity while still allowing airflow to the mural to avoid the creation of a micro-climate around the mural, which would be harmful to its long-term preservation.

As part of the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act, the GSA concluded that “the undertaking will have no adverse effect on the character-defining features of the Clinton Building and the qualities that qualify it for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The curtain and interpretive panels are fully reversible, are consistent with the *Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation*, will leave all historic murals in their original locations, and will continue to allow increased public access and interpretive information for the building-wide mural program.”⁴

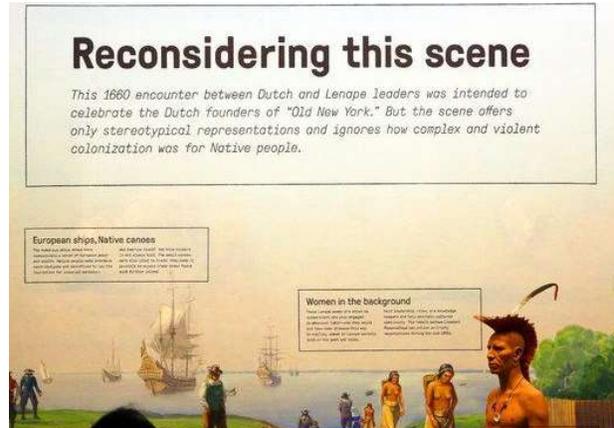
Contacts:

Drapery fabricator: [Whiting and Davis](#)

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RECONTEXTUALIZATION

CASE STUDY: Old New York Diorama – American Museum of Natural History, New York City (New Interpretive Signage Overlay)



On the first floor of the American Museum of Natural History, a diorama created in 1939 depicts an imagined 17th-century meeting between Dutch settlers and the Lenape, an Indigenous tribe inhabiting New Amsterdam, now New York City. It was intended to show a diplomatic negotiation between the two groups, but the portrayal tells a different story.

⁴ Letter from Nancy Witherall, GSA Regional Historic Preservation Officer, to David Maloney, State Historic Preservation Officer for the District of Columbia, November 30, 2017.

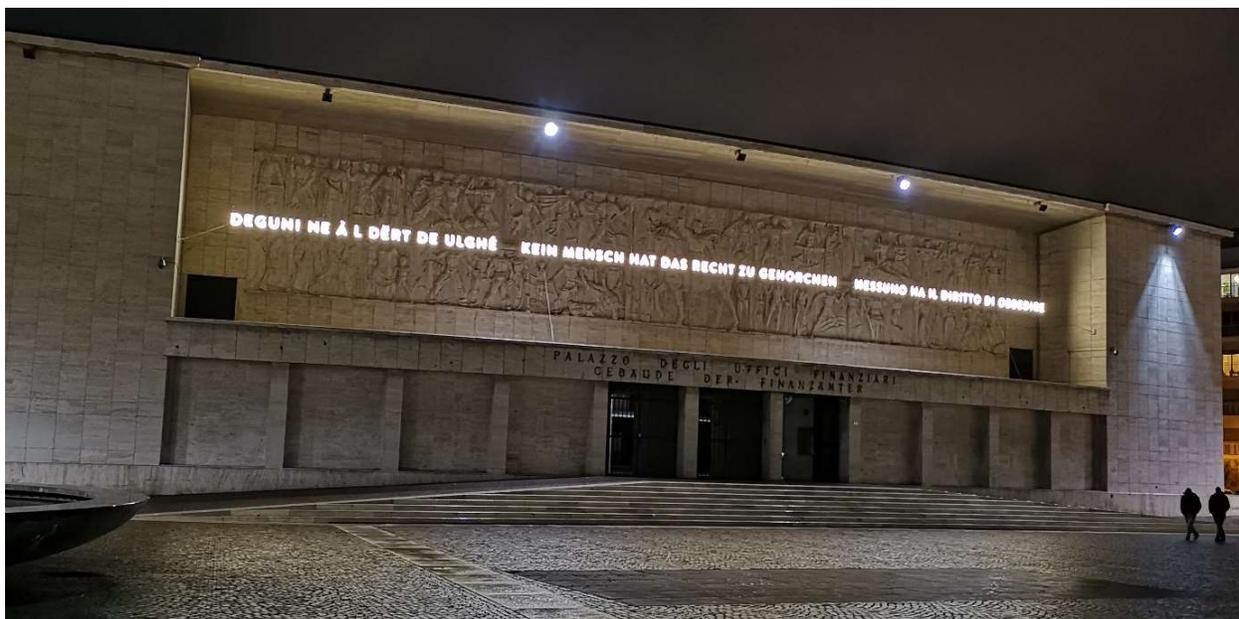
The scene shows tribesmen wearing loincloths and their heads adorned with feathers. A few Lenape women can be seen in the background, undressed to the waist. They keep their heads down, dutiful. In front of a windmill are two fully clothed Dutchmen, one of them resting a firearm on his shoulder. Critics said that the diorama depicts cultural hierarchy, not a cultural exchange. The narrative is filled with historical inaccuracies and clichés of Native representation, according to Bradley Pecore, a visual historian of Menominee and Stockbridge Munsee descent who was hired by the museum to “help solve the diorama problem.” While the scene remains intact, 10 large labels now adorn the glass, summarizing various issues. They were carefully chosen after a research process that took most of 2018. The largest one, visible from a distance, invites visitors to “reconsider this scene.”

Video: American Museum of Natural History – [“Behind the Updates to Old New York Diorama”](#)

CASE STUDY: Palazzo degli Uffici Finanziari – Bozen-Bolzano, Italy (Projected Overlay Text, Explanatory Panels)



A similar intervention was done in 2017 on the large bas-relief covering the **Palazzo degli Uffici Finanziari** in Bozen-Bolzano, Italy, which shows Benito Mussolini on horseback: a lit inscription is now projected onto the wall with a sentence by Hanna Arendt in German, Italian, and Ladin: “Nobody has the right to obey,” challenging the Fascist motto: “CREDERE, OBEDIRE, COMBETERE” (Believe, obey, fight). A set of explanatory panels have been installed on the pavement in front of the building. Thus, the monument has been given a new meaning, opposite to the original one.



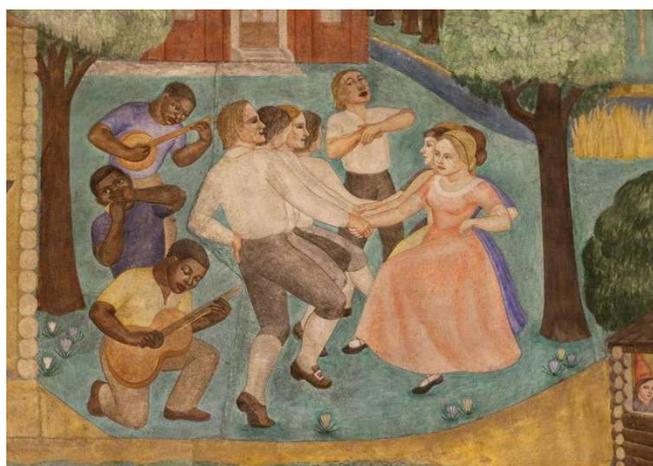
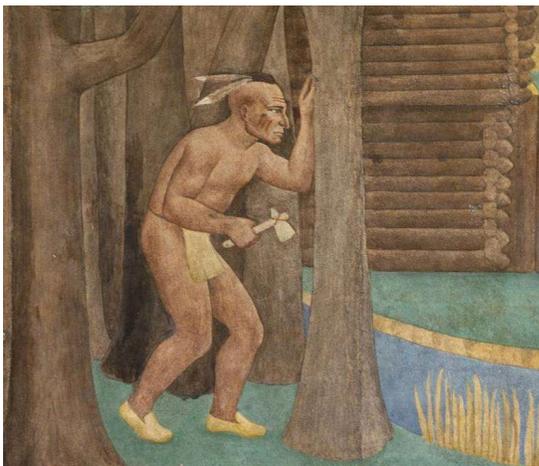


It should be noted that, as part of a class project, teachers and students at George Washington High School have created temporary signage in an effort to recontextualize and interpret Arnautoff's "Life of Washington" mural and Dewey Crumpler's "response murals." Historical quotes and other contextual information are currently placed under multiple panels of both murals (at left). As part of some future solution, students could be similarly engaged in developing content for permanent signage explaining Arnautoff's counternarrative, inaccurate and stereotypical depictions of Native Americans in the mural and across society, efforts at GWHS to remove the murals, etc.

NEW ARTWORK

Another common response to address controversial historical depictions is to commission new artwork "in response." One need not look further than George Washington High School for an early example of this approach: In the 1960s African American students raised their voices to state that they found images in the Arnautoff mural demeaning and asked the School Board to erase them. The solution at that time was to commission a series of "response murals" that would specifically honor the contributions of African American and other marginalized ethnic/racial groups. A series of paintings by young African American painter named Dewey Crumpler, titled "Multi-Ethnic Heritage: Black, Asian, Native/Latin American," were installed in 1974. Crumpler has gone on to become one of San Francisco's prominent painters and muralists and teachers.

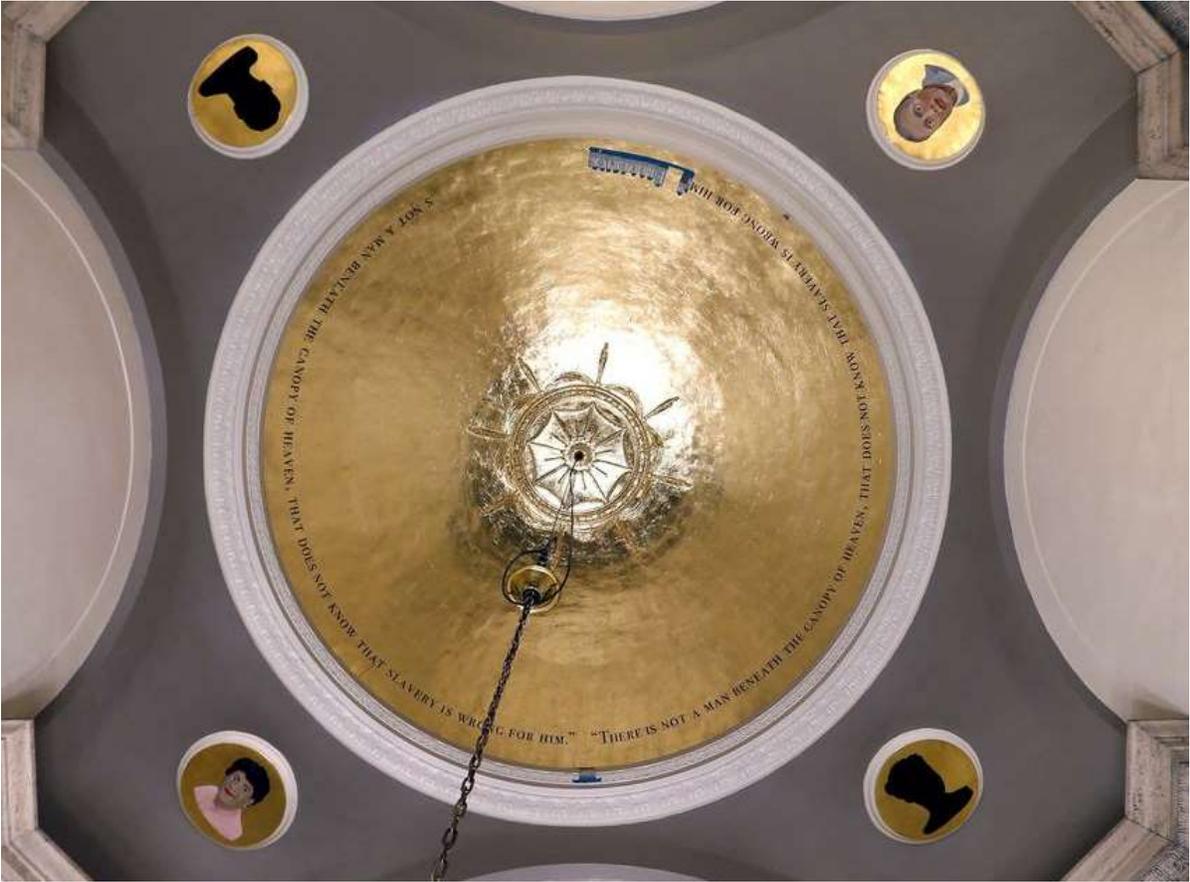
CASE STUDY: Memorial Hall Mural – University of Kentucky (New Art, Contextual Signage)



A 1934 mural by Ann Rice O'Hanlon in the lobby of Memorial Hall, depicting the history of Kentucky, provoked anger among African American and other students of color who find the images of slaves and Native Americans demeaning. In 2015, a group of black students told UK

President Eli Capilouto that the mural mirrored other problems with the campus' racial climate. The university immediately covered the mural as an interim solution. A year later, the mural was uncovered with contextual signage added to describe the work and the concerns people raised about it.

A task force formed by UK decided that art should beget more art that could put other perspectives in front of student eyes. The university considered several proposals from artists before selecting Karyn Olivier in 2018 and offering her a \$30,000 commission. The mural controversy spurred the university to consider how to strengthen its ongoing efforts to ensure that all students feel a sense of belonging. Olivier's work, titled "Witness," gilded Memorial Hall's domed ceiling with gold leaf and painted figures of people of color that Olivier based on images from the decades-old mural (below). Olivier surrounded the dome with portraits of people of color who played important roles in the state's history, including Georgia Davis Powers, the first black person to serve in the Kentucky Senate. The dome is also inscribed with the following quote from Frederick Douglass: "There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven, that does not know that slavery is wrong for him."



**CASE STUDY: “In Pursuit of Venus” by Lisa Reihana, New Zealand
(New Art, Digital Panorama and Reanimation)**



In 2015, New Zealand indigenous artist Lisa Reihana created the powerful digital panorama, “In Pursuit of Venus,” which reanimates the story of Captain Cook and first contact. The 80-foot-wide, 13-foot-tall “digital scroll” with a soundtrack—a full 64 minutes—re-interprets an 1804 French wallpaper by Joseph Dufour, *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (“savages,” above). With the original wallpaper displayed nearby, Reihana’s monumental, immersive artwork (below) places re-enactments by performers of Polynesian, Maori, and Aboriginal First Nations descent within a painted Tahitian landscape in which the historically accurate (geographical features and architecture) bumps up against the imaginary exotic (fantastical plant life). **This epic work will be on display in San Francisco at the de Young Museum from August 10, 2019 thru January 5, 2020.**



PROCESS AND RESOURCES FOR ACHIEVING CONSENSUS

Whatever the proposed response to address the GWHS mural controversy, Heritage strongly recommends that SFUSD convene an additional, inclusive public process led by a professional mediator (or group of mediators) to build consensus around one or more of the above solutions. The process followed to resolve an eight-year dispute regarding whether to restore or paint over a mural on the exterior walls of the branch library in Bernal Heights provides a potential model. Traditionally a working-class neighborhood known for political activism and attention to community concerns, Bernal housed a diverse population of Latino, Filipino, and European heritage. As the neighborhood was growing rapidly upscale, the mural came to represent the culture and entitlement of existing residents to live on the hill. To others, the mural blighted a beautiful building.

To resolve this seemingly intractable conflict, area officials convened a mediation led by Beth Roy, an experienced mediator and Bernal resident. The group, which reflected the wide range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds in the community, ultimately came to a strong consensus, resulting in the reinterpretation of the artwork to reflect changing times and to honor the full population of the neighborhood. The 2014 book, [The Bernal Story: Mediating Class and Race in a Multicultural Community](#), describes in detail how the process was designed, who took part, how the group of twelve community representatives came to a consensus, and how that agreement was carried into the larger community and implemented.

Another potential resource is the [Reclaiming Native Truth](#) initiative, a national effort launched in 2016 to “foster cultural, social, and policy change by empowering Native Americans to counter discrimination, invisibility, and the dominant narratives that limit Native opportunity, access to justice, health, and self-determination. Reclaiming Native Truth’s goal is to move hearts and minds toward greater respect, inclusion, and social justice for Native Americans.” The initiative began with more than a year of nationwide research into what different groups of Americans — across socio-economic, racial, geographic, gender, and generational cohorts — think (and don’t know) about Native peoples and Native issues. New research was also conducted concerning Native people’s perceptions of mascots and the impacts of negative depictions. From this research, Reclaiming Native Truth crafted a new narrative framework and strategy that focuses on changing the dominant narrative from one of deficit, invisibility, falsehoods, and stereotypes to one grounded in truth about the rich history of Native peoples and their current contributions, assets, and strength. With input from a large advisory group, the initiative has published several instructional guides that can be downloaded from its website, including [Narrative Change Strategy](#), [Changing the Narrative About Native Americans: A Guide for Allies](#), and most recently, [Creating Visibility and Healthy Learning Environments for Native Americans in Higher Education](#).

One of these advisors, Dr. Cheryl Crazy Bull, president of the American Indian College Fund, referenced Reclaiming Native Truth in her comments on the mural controversy at Notre Dame (see above). She encouraged the university to “make a significant investment in the educational opportunity that those murals represent. What the Reclaiming Native Truth initiative learned was that if you help people see the truth, they change their minds about how to support indigenous rights and tribal sovereignty... Why not have a lecture series and bring in people who can talk about those issues, including the doctrine of discovery? That

raises the visibility. And work on curriculum with some area schools that brings it into K-12 education, which our initiative shows is a game-changer.”

Although Heritage has not contacted Reclaiming Native Truth or Dr. Crazy Bull, and we cannot speak to their reputation, they could be a valuable source of research, guidance, and credibility in support of the School Board’s ultimate course of action.

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