

Abstract

In recent years, a cycle of thirteen murals in a San Francisco high school depicting the life of George Washington has provoked social conflict and calls for the murals' overpainting or outright destruction. Critics have denounced as racist the murals' depiction of Native Americans (including one dead at the feet of Washington) and Black slaves.

The cycle was created in 1936 by the Soviet émigré artist Victor Arnautoff under the government auspices of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The historical context and political consciousness of the artist have been almost entirely erased in the current controversy. Indeed, the murals are often discussed as though they themselves were without history, as though they had not been on display in George Washington High School for more than 80 years.

This paper counters that amnesia by focusing on Arnautoff's insurgent critiques of American nationalism from within the very form—the WPA mural—that was meant to celebrate it in the 1930s. I also consider the artist's engagement with Communist politics in both San Francisco and Mexico, his affiliation with Diego Rivera, and his long-held commitments to collectivism. I retrieve these contexts not to defend Arnautoff or his murals but to insist on the value of historical knowledge when looking at them. We cannot understand the artist's representation of racial difference and indigeneity (much less of whiteness or capitalism) until we reckon with the visual and political culture in which he was operating. If we consider what the mural meant in 1936, we can better grapple with what it has come to mean in 2022. Arnautoff presented Washington as the indispensable leader of a new democracy but also, and simultaneously, a supporter of slavery and the slaughter of Native Americans. Through the complexity of the artist's vision, Washington may be seen as both “the Father of our Country” and a bad daddy.

This paper uses Arnautoff and *The Life of Washington* to make a broader argument: Current debates over art and identity-based categories (e.g. race, sexuality, gender) would benefit from engaging more fully with another form of difference—the difference of the historical past from the present moment.