

LOCAL

UCSF makes about-face to save New Deal-era murals from destruction

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One of the beginning murals in the series of medical history in California painted by artist Bernard Zakheim in Toland Hall at UCSF Parnassus campus in San Francisco, California on Friday, February 27, 2015.

Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

In a surprising reversal, UCSF announced that it will save and store a famous New Deal-era series of murals inside a medical school building scheduled for demolition in 2022.

The 1938 frescoes titled "The History of Medicine" were painted by Bernard Zakheim on commission by the Federal Art Project during the Great Depression. Five years ago, it was put on a rare public display as the "crown jewel" of the university's art collection. But last June, UCSF administrators revealed that the crown jewel might be too fragile or too costly to move. The estimate was \$8 million, and descendants of Zakheim were given 90 days to come up with a plan to take possession of the murals "at their own expense," as stated in a legal notice sent to the family by UCSF.

This brought an outcry from the heirs, along with New Deal historians, and champions of the artist who collaborated with Diego Rivera and contributed to historic murals inside Coit Tower. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors began proceedings to give the “History of Medicine” emergency landmark status, a symbolic designation since the UC campus is a state facility. In addition, the General Services Administration, a federal agency that oversees artwork funded by the Works Progress Administration (which was part of the New Deal), stated that the murals were on loan and could not be destroyed. In the face of this resistance, UCSF changed its plans this fall, and budgeted \$3.2 million for removal and storage.

“UCSF’s goal has always been to find the best solution for preserving the ‘History of Medicine in California’ mural, given the need to replace the seismically deficient building where they are currently located,” said Brian Newman, senior associate vice chancellor of real estate, in a statement Sunday.

By next fall, the murals are expected to be in storage at a university-owned warehouse in Oyster Point, in South San Francisco, “while we look for a new permanent home for them,” Newman said. In the new year a task force will be formed to “evaluate various options, including finding another location on campus or partnering with a museum.” The removal process will begin in January. The San Francisco firm ARG Conservation Services has been contracted to evaluate the condition of the murals and take any conservation before removing them from Toland Hall, once the main clinical amphitheater at the School of Medicine.

“Our job is to preserve it,” said David Wessel, principal and CEO of ARG/CS. “We will assure that the artwork is not damaged in the process of relocation.”

The work consists of 10 separate paintings, in a variety of sizes, the largest being 9 feet tall and 9 feet wide. In the fresco process, the pigment is applied while the plaster is wet so the art becomes part of the finished wall. To remove it, the lath and plaster must be separated from its concrete outer wall. But conservationists have discovered a 10-inch airspace between the plaster wall and the concrete wall. The two walls are connected at various points which should be easy to sever.

“The murals were designed to be removed by my father when he painted them,” said Nathan Zakheim, an art conservator in Southern California. “He showed me when I went there with him starting at age 10. It is a piece of cake.”



A section of one mural depicts Bridget “Biddy” Mason, a formerly enslaved woman who became a pioneering midwife and philanthropist in early Los Angeles. The artwork might be stored at Oyster Point.
Susan Merrell / UCSF

Removing them from the building will be the challenge. There is no doorway wide enough, so they might have to be airlifted by crane through a skylight and onto a truck waiting in an alley adjacent to Parnassus Avenue.

“There is no easy way out,” said Wessel, who has put together a team of three conservation specialists, a structural engineer, an architect, a scaffolding company and a transport specialist just to get each panel to the street in one piece.

Missing from the team of onsite experts is any member of the Zakheim family. Reached by phone Sunday, Zakheim’s grandson, Adam Gottstein, said he had not been made aware by UCSF of the \$3.2 million budgeted for removal of the mural and to cover additional unanticipated costs. In earlier communication, the family was advised that the UCSF contribution would be capped at \$1.8 million, he said.

“On the surface, the family is happy that UCSF has awarded the contract,” said Gottstein, a family spokesperson living in the Sierra foothills. “It now appears that the murals will be saved and not destroyed. That’s wonderful news, but our concern is that they properly be conserved before removal.”

The descendants are also concerned that the murals will be stored in Oyster Point, adjacent to San Francisco Bay, which might create humidity issues. “This is not putting a piece of stainless steel into storage,” said Gottstein. “Moisture is the enemy of fresco panels.”

A Polish immigrant, Zakheim had socialist leanings and would have enjoyed any controversy caused by his art, according to Coit Tower mural preservationist Jon Gollinger, who wrote a play with Zakheim as protagonist.

“These murals are among the lucky treasures that San Francisco was gifted,” Gollinger said. “When you stand in front of them you are in awe of the power of one person to communicate ideas in paint on walls 80 years ago and they are still alive today.” Among its lively depictions are interactions between Spanish missionaries and Native Americans, as well as images of enslaved Black people who became nurses, that would be found offensive today.

Some of the content is similar to that in the WPA murals at George Washington High School, which the school board voted to cover. Gottstein noted that there has been no commitment from UCSF to re-install the “History of Medicine” murals, and there is neither plan nor budget beyond removal and storage. He doesn’t care where the murals might reappear, as long as they are not locked away in storage indefinitely.

“If those murals end up somewhere other than the Parnassus campus, the family is fine with that,” he said. “We want them to go wherever they will be most appreciated and viewed by the public.”

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Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly described the status of the WPA murals at George Washington High School. The school board voted to cover those murals.