Arnautoff and his family moved to Mexico where he worked as an assistant to the famed muralist Diego Rivera. Returning to San Francisco in 1931, Arnautoff gained attention by painting a large fresco mural on his studio wall. He then did several fresco panels at the Palo Alto Clinic that remain on view.

Victor Arnautoff, Self Portrait, 1934
The artist included this self portrait in his “City Life” mural.
Photo Credit: Robert Cherny

Victor Arnautoff was a prolific artist of public murals during the New Deal, many of which are still in place. Born in Russia in 1896, Arnautoff was a cavalry officer in WWI and later in the White Siberian army during the Russian Civil War. Escaping into northeastern China, he married and his father-in-law paid for him to attend the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. His first public mural, in 1929, can be seen in the city’s Old Cathedral of the Holy Virgin.

Painting the mural “City Life.”
San Francisco’s Coit Tower, 1934

Photo Credit: Courtesy of the History Center, San Francisco Public Library
With the New Deal in 1933, federal funds became available for public art. In San Francisco, the Public Works of Art Project hired 25 artists to create murals at Coit Tower. Arnautoff, highly experienced in fresco technique, was designated technical coordinator of the project. His mural, City Life, completed in 1934, presents a vivid kaleidoscope of downtown San Francisco at a time of economic and social upheaval.
Arnaultoff’s next New Deal commission, a large mural in the Protestant chapel at the Presidio of San Francisco, funded by the State Emergency Relief Administration, depicts historical vignettes and contemporary activities at the military base, including the Army’s supervision of the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Arnaultoff at work
George Washington High School, San Francisco, 1936
Photo Credit: Courtesy of the History Center, San Francisco Public Library

Arnaultoff’s political views moved to the left in the mid-1930s, and he sometimes incorporated social criticism into his art. His largest single New Deal commission was thirteen fresco panels on the life of George Washington, painted in 1936 at the newly built George Washington High School in San Francisco.

Funded by the WPA’s Federal Art Project, the murals present a counter narrative to the high school history texts of the time: the panel on Mount Vernon emphasizes Washington’s dependence on slave labor, and that on the westward “march of the white race” (Arnaultoff’s description) shows it taking place over the body of dead Indian.

He exhibited at the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition, the 1935 California Pacific Exposition, and the 1940 New York World’s Fair.

Mural, “Life of Washington,”
George Washington High School, San Francisco
The fresco, consists of 12 panels and measures 1600-square-feet
Photo Credit: Richard Evans

Between 1938 and 1942 Arnaultoff completed five Treasury Section post office murals. Those in College Station and Linden, Texas, prominently featured African Americans, rarely depicted in public artworks. His post office murals can still be seen at Linden and at Pacific Grove and South San Francisco, California. Arnaultoff’s mural for the Richmond, California, Post Office was recently discovered in a packing crate in the post office’s basement. It is being restored for exhibition in the Richmond Museum of History.
In the 1950s, Arnautoff, while teaching at Stanford, was shunned for his leftist views and was interrogated by the House Un-American Activities Committee. In 1963, after the death of his wife, he emigrated to the Soviet Union where he continued to paint and make prints and created three large public murals using mosaic tiles. He died in 1979.

Robert W. Cherny is professor emeritus of history at San Francisco State University. He is the author of Victor Arnautoff and the Politics of Art (University of Illinois Press, 2017), and numerous books and essays on U.S. history and politics.

June 26, 2017

This entry was posted in News and tagged Coit Tower, Federal Art Project, Living New Deal, New Deal murals, Victor Arnautoff by Robert Cherny.

2 comments on “Paint and Politics—the Life and Work of Victor Arnautoff By Robert Cherny”

1. Mark R. Carter, J.D., Ph.D. February 22, 2019

Thank you for posting this overview of Arnautoff’s work. It is moving to read because, alas, George Washington High School seems set to destroy Arnautoff’s Life of Washington mural. I have seen it many times. Some concerned citizens falsely think the mural glorifies enslaving Blacks and killing Indians. Of course, as you note, Arnautoff expressly intended the opposite. Destroying the mural will only further deify Washington, as Americans deify past presidents and especially the Founders, by whitewashing unpleasant pictures of Washington and our nation’s Devil’s bargain of slavery, genocide, and repression of some people for the quick wealth of others. We, as a nation, must know and recall the past to avoid repeating it, especially during Black History Month, including Washington’s Birthday. As good art, the mural has provoked
thought and can continue to do so, if George Washington High School will simply let the mural stand, use it to teach about the past, and warn us against our terrible mistakes. Work this powerful should never be intentionally destroyed—gone forever.

2. **Sylvia J Lewis**  *April 8, 2019*

By destroying art works of any kind is to destroy our historical past of America. Hopefully, history will not repeat itself without our memories of what really happened in our country’s past.

https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/95xxn2fm9780252040788.html

**Victor Arnautoff and the Politics of Art**

A political biography of the great California muralist

A leading West Coast modernist, Victor Arnautoff reigned as San Francisco's leading mural painter during the New Deal era. Yet that was only part of an astonishing life journey from Tsarist officer to leftist painter that reflected a century of tumult in politics and art.

Robert W. Cherny's masterful biography of Arnautoff braids the artist's work with his increasingly leftist politics and the tenor of his times. Delving into sources on Russian émigrés and San Francisco's arts communities, Cherny traces Arnautoff's life from refugee art student and assistant to Diego Rivera to prominence in the New Deal's art projects and a faculty position at Stanford University. As Arnautoff's politics moved left, he often incorporated working people and people of color into his treatment of the American past and present. In the 1950s, however, his participation in leftist organizations and a highly critical cartoon of Richard Nixon landed him before the House Un-American Activities Committee and led to calls for his dismissal from Stanford. Arnautoff eventually departed America, a refugee of another kind, now fleeing personal loss and the disintegration of the left-labor culture that had nurtured him, before resuming his artistic career in the Soviet Union that he had fought in his youth to destroy.

"[Cherny] does a magisterial job of placing the artist in the context of his times with fruitful discussion of the surrounding politics, social fabric, and ethnic influences. The result is a fascinating study of the artist and his times."--*Newsletter of the San Francisco Museum and Historical Society*
"A fascinating study of Russian American muralist Victor Arnautoff." -- Choice

"Engaging and impressively researched. . . This is an interesting work that ties the biography of a fascinating historical actor to global art and politics." -- Western Historical Quarterly

"A useful tool for scholars who want to pursue further work on Arnautoff's legacy and Russian art in the United States." -- H-Net

"We have Cherny to thank for the detective work that produced this fine biography of an artist whose work and life tell us much about twentieth century history." -- Pacific Historical Review

"Robert W. Cherny has written a fascinating and meticulously researched political biography exploring the life and work of the public muralist Victor Arnautoff." -- The Journal of American History

"Robert Cherny, a leading historian of California politics and former Fulbright Professor at Moscow State University in Russia has written the definitive account of the odyssey of Victor Arnautoff, a Czarist cavalry officer in World War I who migrated after the war to the Pacific Coast, became an influential and controversial figure in the San Francisco leftwing arts scene from the 1920s through the 1950s, and then returned to Russia after deciding to live out his life in the Soviet Union of the 1960s and 1970s. Cherny tells a spellbinding story that is at once illuminating and authoritative in its depiction of the Russian diaspora after the Bolshevik Revolution, the cultural politics of San Francisco from the Twenties through the Fifties, the intersection of individual artistic creativity, patronage and philanthropy, and public arts policy in California in the context of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. His book establishes a new gold standard in the field of California cultural history in the twentieth century." -- William Issel, author of Church and State in the City: Catholics and Politics in Twentieth Century San Francisco


"This work, in being so faithfully executed and richly illustrated, will move every student of art and history to admiration. It is the beautifully crafted tale of an artist whose work and most unusual life reflected the destinies of two great nations." -- Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, author of The American Left: Its Impact on Politics and Society since 1990

Robert W. Cherny is professor emeritus of history at San Francisco State University. His publications include five books on American politics.
Despite having produced some outstanding paintings and murals and leading a thrilling life, the painter Victor Arnautoff (1896-1979) remains fairly unknown in both the public and academic spheres. Born and raised in what is now eastern Ukraine, Arnautoff emigrated to the United States in 1925. He became an active participant in the New Deal programs initiated by the Roosevelt administration to give work to artists during the Great Depression. A brief summary of Arnautoff's life can only provoke further curiosity in the reader. Arnautoff, the son of an Orthodox priest, served as a cavalry officer in the First World War and later lived in China for nearly five years. When Arnautoff arrived in California, he attended the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco and then spent two years in Mexico. By the end of the 1930s, he had become a member of the Communist Party of the United States. After retiring from the faculty of art at Stanford University in 1963, Arnautoff decided to return to the Soviet Union, where he resided until his death in 1979. Throughout his life he acted as an important cultural ambassador between the USSR and the USA. Arnautoff traveled to Mexico a year before Diego Rivera's first creative trip to California. He subsequently played a leading role in the establishment of mural art in San Francisco. The artistic exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union, however, have often been overlooked by scholars. Moreover, film and cinema tend to receive more attention than painting in the few studies that do exist, while monographic works on some of the key figures are almost completely absent. This comprehensive biography by Robert W. Cherny is intended to address this
gap in the literature devoted to this pivotal period, and represents a tribute to Arnautoff and his artistic and cultural contribution.

Cherny's work on Arnautoff began with a lecture delivered in spring 2011, in which the scholar summarized various documents from the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art; the monograph devoted to Arnautoff's biography soon appeared in print. The archival materials that Cherny had access to is extensive, ranging from the National Archives to FBI files, and include some from Russian archives. Oral interviews with Arnautoff’s close circle of family and friends were also conducted by the biographer between 1986 and 2014. In addition, letters written by the artist as well as his 1965 autobiography offer readers an intimate insight into his personal life. Eleven chronological chapters situate Arnautoff in the historical context of the twentieth century, and an appendix lists his public murals in both Ukraine and the United States Reproductions of both his paintings and murals are also included.

As he explains in his preface, Cherny set out to answer two questions: "What explains Arnautoff’s 180-degree shift in his political perspective from serving as a White officer [in the Russian Civil War] to joining the Communist Party? How did Arnautoff’s politics affect his art, or, put another way, how did his art reflect his politics?" (p. xi). Therefore, one of the main topics of the book is Arnautoff’s artworks created in the 1920s and early 1930s. In particular, the author discusses the spectacular murals at Coit Tower (the biggest muralist project of San Francisco ) in order to argue with the assumptions and conclusions of Anthony Lee in Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco’s Public Murals (1999).

The first three chapters provide the details of Arnautoff’s life in Tsarist Russia, his stay in China, and his emigration to California. Arnautoff was born in the village of Uspenivka (Ekaterinoslav Province) and grew up in Mariupol. Intertwined is context of the massive colony of Russian émigrés in China during the Civil War. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are particularly fascinating for art historians, as they present rich details on the beginning of Arnautoff’s career in San Francisco. Cherny invites the readers to look into the way of life of Russian immigrants on the West Coast. He also draws attention to the leading role that Diego Rivera played in constructing a definition for American muralism. Cherny explains
how Arnautoff and Rivera collaborated, referring to the writings of Ilya Ehrenburg and
Vladimir Mayakovsky, who were Rivera's friends. Cherny quotes a funny remark by
Rivera about Arnautoff’s paintings: “Your landscapes are Mexican, but the spirit of them is Russian” (p. 75). Chapter 6 is devoted to the Coit Tower history. If in chapter 7 we can still find some details of Arnautoff’s murals (for the hall of the new George Washington High School in San Francisco and for some post offices), the last four chapters are almost completely related to the muralist’s personal life and his political activities. In chapter 9, Cherny attempts to explain the growing sense of isolation experienced by Arnautoff, who was affected by the beginning of the Cold War and anticommunism but also by the "rapid and far-reaching changes in the San Francisco art community" (p. 149). After several attempts to return to the Soviet Union, Arnautoff finally succeeded in the early 1960s. Although he was readmitted back to his homeland, he experienced political tensions with the Soviet government—ironically, just as he had in the United States for being a communist.

As mentioned by Cherny in the preface, yet which remains unexplained, there is quite an imbalance between the treatment of the 1920s and that of the 1930s. The remaining chapters of the book also focus more on Arnautoff’s political life as opposed to offering an art-historical analysis, which thus sheds little light on Arnautoff’s involvement in the world of art during the Cold War. Moreover, the extensive reproduction of easel paintings in the book suggests that readers will learn more about his art than his political and social activities, but unfortunately, this remains understudied. Due to the greater use of the American archives than Russian ones, there is some unevenness in the case studies. Thus, in some chapters, it seems that the author has emphasized the complexity of the political context over the importance of Arnautoff’s artworks. Putting this criticism aside, this monograph is a useful tool for scholars who want to pursue further work on Arnautoff’s legacy and Russian émigré art in the United States.

Editorial note: Several inaccuracies in the original review have been corrected. These include the name of the art school Arnautoff attended; the length of time he spent in China; and the name of the San Francisco high school where one of his murals is located.
What an absolutely interesting life story. As art history becomes more and more cognizant of its global histories, I hope we learn more about artists like Arnautoff who worked on multiple continents and within transnational networks that drew on political and artistic, rather than national, affinities. I can imagine including Arnautoff's Coit Tower murals alongside Rivera and AKhRR in a classroom discussion of realisms social and socialist, though it sounds like his later mosaic work in the Soviet Union would make an interesting study as well. Thanks to review editor Hanna Chuchvaha and reviewer Juliette Milbach for calling our attention to him.

Yelena Kalinsky
H-SHERA editor
Victor Arnautoff

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

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<td>Self-portrait. 1941.</td>
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**Native name**  
Виктор Михайлович Арнаутов

**Born**  
Victor Mikhail Arnautoff  
1896  
*Uspenivka, Taurida Governorate (Ukraine, then in Russian Empire)*

**Died**  
March 22, 1979  
*Leningrad, Soviet Union, buried in Mariupol Ukraine*

**Known for**  
Murals

**Notable work**  
*Coit Tower* murals

Victor Mikhail Arnautoff (born *Uspenivka, Taurida Governorate (Russian Empire)*, November 11, 1896 – died *Leningrad*, Soviet Union, March 22, 1979) was a Russian-American painter and professor of art. He worked in San Francisco and the Bay Area from 1925 to 1963, including two decades as a teacher at Stanford University, and was particularly prolific as a muralist during the 1930s. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen, but returned to the Soviet Union after the death of his wife, continuing his career there before his death.

- 1Early life in Russia
Early life in Russia

Arnautoff was the son of a Russian Orthodox priest. He showed a talent for art from an early age and hoped to study art after graduating from the gymnasium in Mariupol. With the outbreak of World War I, he enrolled in the Yelizavetgrad Cavalry School. He went on to hold military leadership positions in the army of Nicholas II and the White Siberian army.[1]

With the defeat of the Whites in Siberia, he crossed into northeastern China and surrendered his weapons. He remained in China for five years. He again tried to pursue art, signing up for schooling in Harbin, but was impoverished and took a position training the cavalry of the warlord Zhang Zuolin.[2][page needed] While serving the warlord in Mukden, China, he met and married Lydia Blonsky and they had two sons, Michael and Vasily.[3]

US and Mexico

In November 1925 Arnautoff went to San Francisco on a student visa to study at the California School of Fine Arts.[3] There he studied sculpture with Edgar Walter and painting with Gertrude Partington Albright and other instructors.[2][page needed] He also became active in the city's leftist arts scene.[1]

Arnautoff and his family continued to Mexico in 1929, where, on Ralph Stackpole's recommendation, he became an assistant to the muralist Diego Rivera. Rivera and Arnautoff first worked on a series of murals at the Palace of Cortés, Cuernavaca. After starting the murals in the National Palace, Rivera went to San Francisco to paint a mural in the new Stock Exchange building, leaving Arnautoff in charge for a time.[4] A third son, Jacob, was born in Mexico.

While in Mexico, Arnautoff met Bernard Zakheim, another leftist immigrant San Francisco muralist.[1] The two would later work together on the Coit Tower murals.

Work in the Bay Area

"City Life" mural, Coit Tower, San Francisco, painted by Arnautoff

Another part of the City Life mural, featuring a self-portrait of Arnautoff, near a magazine rack containing socialist/communist magazines.
In 1931 the family returned to San Francisco. Arnautoff's first significant work after returning was a mural on the wall of his studio, which he opened to the public. Shortly afterward, he completed his first mural commission, for the Palo Alto Medical Clinic in Palo Alto (where he had been a patient) in August 1932. The unveiling of this mural caused a traffic jam and some controversy, in part because the mural showed a doctor examining a female patient whose bare breasts were at eye-level. Like his other works in the Bay Area, the murals were frescoes.

In 1934 he was chosen to paint one of the murals to be done at Coit Tower in San Francisco, with funding from the Public Works of Art Project. He was also appointed technical director of the Coit Tower murals project. He is prominently represented there by a mural depicting San Francisco city life. This mural includes a self-portrait as well as a portrait of his son, Michael. The mural caused some controversy at the time, because the newsstand Arnautoff portrait is next to excluded the San Francisco Chronicle and included left-wing newspapers. It also included other references to the "lack of concern" people show each other, including a sign for Charlie Chaplin's "City Lights", which is concerned in part with the same theme.

Arnautoff was, along with fellow activist Bernard Zakheim, perhaps the most prolific muralist in San Francisco in the 1930s. He completed not only the murals at the Palo Alto Clinic and Coit Tower, but also at the Presidio chapel, George Washington High School, and the California School of Fine Arts library. All of these murals were focused on humanist themes, including concerns about class, labor, and power. He also painted five post offices (College Station and Linden, Texas; Pacific Grove, Richmond, and South San Francisco, California), and held solo exhibitions throughout the 1930s.

George Washington High School

Arnautoff's 13 fresco murals at George Washington High School in San Francisco, titled Life of Washington, has been controversial since the 1960s due to its depiction of slavery and a dead Native American. One theory is that this mural served as a "counter narrative" to history, when it was painted in 1936. However, critics of the mural believe it does not belong in a public school, depicts ahistorical events, and sends a racist message. The San Francisco Board of Education voted in June 2019 to develop a plan to remove all 13 panels of the mural as a form of reparations for past crimes.

Teaching and political activity

Arnautoff taught sculpture and fresco painting privately and at the California School of Fine Arts, first during summer sessions and as a regular instructor beginning in 1936. He taught art at Stanford University from 1938 to 1962. Beginning in 1947, he also taught art courses at the California Labor School, including printmaking. At Stanford, Richard Diebenkorn was one of his students; Diebenkorn considered Arnautoff a mentor and admired his intellectual and political stances.

Beginning with his association with Rivera, Arnautoff's political views moved to the left, and he joined the Communist Party as well as the American Artists’ Congress and the San Francisco Artists and Writers Union. His style was generally more subtle than Rivera's and other social realists, but his politics were nevertheless reflected in his work,
which has been described as being part of a mural arts movement that "hoped to inspire change through criticism of the present political system".[5][4, 50]

In 1955, an Arnautoff lithograph titled "DIX McSmear", associating Vice President Richard Nixon with McCarthyism, created controversy. As a result, there were calls for Stanford to dismiss him. The lithograph was then used as the cover for an issue of *The Nation*. After he was interrogated by a House Unamerican Activities Committee subcommittee, there were again calls for Stanford to dismiss him. However, the faculty committee that reviewed his case declined to make such a recommendation to the president, and Arnautoff remained a faculty member.[4][14]

Later life and return to Soviet Ukraine

Following the death of his wife in 1961, Arnautoff retired from Stanford. He returned to the Soviet Union in 1963, settling in Mariupol, Ukraine, where he had attended gymnasium. While living there, he published a memoir, and created large tile mosaics on public buildings, including a school and a communications building. He also did woodcuts for books, and had several solo exhibitions.[7] He remarried in 1970 and died in Leningrad on March 22, 1979.[6]

Public works

In California

- Fresco murals of medical clinic (1932), Roth Building, 300 Homer St, Palo Alto, California, United States[16][17]
- *Peacetime Activities of the Army* (1935) fresco mural, Presidio Chapel, San Francisco, California, United States[18]
- Exterior reliefs and the controversial 13 fresco murals "Life of Washington" (1936), George Washington High School, San Francisco, California, United States[8][19][20][9]
- *Urban Life* mural, Coit Tower, San Francisco, California, United States[5][21]
- *Lovers’ Point* (1940), oil on canvas post office mural, Pacific Grove, California, United States[22]
- *Richmond Industrial City* (1941), oil on canvas post office mural, Richmond, California, United States[23]
- *South San Francisco, Past and Present* (1941), oil on canvas post office mural, South San Francisco, California, United States[24]

Other locations

- *The Last Crop* (1938) post office mural, Linden, Texas, United States[25][2]:297
- Post Office and School No. 54, Mariupol, Ukraine[15]

References[edit]


External links[edit]

- Arnoff Papers in Archives of American Art
- Arnoff in UC Berkeley's Living New Deal catalog
- Gallery representing Estate of Victor Arnoff
- William Mandel, "Victor Arnoff: Passionate Paintings of the Bay Area Black Community in the Mid-20th Century"

http://www.helfenfinearts.com/blogs/arnauffFset.html (click on link to go to Gallery)

Victor Arnoff
1896-1979

Theme/Style – Social Realism, Regionalism, landscapes

Media – Oils, murals, lithography, mosaic murals

Artistic Focus – Victor Arnoff created paintings and watercolor works, focusing on portraits, still lifes and rural landscapes in his early years, and moved to more socially conscious themes later in his career
Career Highlights –

• He came to America through China, bringing his wife and children with him, and studied at the California School of Fine Arts before going to Mexico. There he worked as an assistant to muralist Diego Rivera.
• As project director and one of the artists selected to create the famed Coit Tower murals, Victor Arnautoff played a key role in determining the political and social content of the frescoes painted in the San Francisco landmark. His own contribution, City Life, appears to be a lively, non-political melding of downtown San Francisco scenes; however, closer study reveals two leftist newspapers on the newsstand, while the city’s most mainstream daily, the San Francisco Chronicle, is strangely missing.
• Painted frescoes in the Military Chapel at San Francisco’s Presidio, in the Anne Bremer Library of the San Francisco Art Institute, and in high schools and other buildings in the Bay Area.
• Taught art at Stanford University from 1939 until his retirement in 1963 after which he returned to Russia, where he lived out his life.

The Gallery proudly represents the Estate of Victor Arnautoff.

Bibliographic references are available upon request.

Victor Arnautoff
1896-1979

The Gallery is Proud to Represent the Estate of Victor Arnautoff

Selection of Works by This Artist

http://www.helfenfinearts.com/biogs/arnautoffFset.html
(click on link to go to Gallery)
In 1947, "the towns along El Camino Real, U.S. 101 bordering Stanford, had a policy that no African-American should be within their borders after the sun went down. A Black faculty member was simply beyond imagination. I remember no African students, and find it hard to conceive that there might have been one, even aside from the financial barrier. Where would one live? In a fraternity or sorority? Incredible. In a dorm? But then whites would have to tolerate a Black sleeping in the same room. Out of the question."

"A faculty art show was on and I wandered in. But for one painting it was typical of academic work at that time: a competent, bland collection of decorative still-lifes, landscapes, portraits, strictly realist, and leaning heavily to watercolors and pastels. Not a thought in a carload -- except for that one painting. Its strong but totally naturalist oils blazed across the room.

"The painting depicted four Black men, working men in their go-to-church-on-Sunday suits, carrying a coffin in the middle of Market Street, San Francisco's main thoroughfare. A bulky policeman, standing with legs spread wide, each hand grasping an end of his club, stood behind them, watching. Over his shoulder shone the traffic light, blazing red. The title was 'Anti-Lynching Demonstration.' The artist's name was painted in clear block letters at the bottom: Victor Arnautoff."

"I sought him out. I would have done so in any case because of the painting but I was also desperately looking for a kindred soul on campus.

"I told Arnautoff that I had been deeply affected by the painting, its craftsmanship, execution, and subject-matter. I gave him a copy of my recently-published book, as a token of respect, and inscribed it accordingly. He said that if I liked his work so much...Tanya and I should come to his studio...and see his entire opus...."

"It floored us. We had been raised on New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and that city's other great collections, and our standards were high, if conventional. This man was good. He was not only good, but his work also covered a wide range of human experience. His use of color was northern-California vivid and absolutely true, the draftsmanship superb. He loved color for its own sake, but believed in depictive realism. He put his passion for color into the red of the stoplight in the anti-lynching painting, the balloon tugging at its string in the hand of an unemployed seller who was the subject of
another, the pastel of an arguing housewife's workaday skirt, the gold of the dry grass in a pasture, the California sky.

"We oohed and aahed our enthusiasm. As we expressed our thanks yet again and started out the door, he said, 'If you like them so much, why don't you take one?' I was utterly embarrassed, and made clear that was a degree of generosity I would not accept. He said, 'But you gave me a copy of your book!' I replied: 'The book costs $5 and your paintings are marked $100 and $150.' He countered, 'But it took you much longer to write the book than it took me to do any of the paintings!' And then knocked us over completely by saying, 'You don't seem to know which you like best. Take one for a while, and if it isn't what you want to live with, bring it back and try another instead.' We agreed."

When we found a house to rent near Stanford: "There wasn't a painting or even a print in the place, not a single bookcase or bookshelf, and there were things like a flat wooden three-or-four-foot high Black jockey holding an ash tray.

"I phoned Arnautoff, described the interior horror to him, and made what I thought was a very bold request. Instead of lending us one painting, would he lend us three or four to light up those awful walls? From them we would ultimately select the one he had offered us as gift. He agreed."

"Victor had been born into the lower ranks of the Russian hereditary nobility....When the revolution occurred, he naturally fought with the monarchists against the Communists....Arnautoff had stewed for years over the great puzzle of his side's defeat in the Russian Civil War. They had the trained officers. Artillery, machine-guns, rifles, munitions, even some tanks and planes, were all provided by the United States. The Communists had nothing....After years of agonizing -- quite literally, for it resulted in an ulcer that ultimately caused him half his stomach -- Arnautoff concluded that the people had been on the side of the Communists. And for the rest of his fairly long life they stayed there.

"So this aristocrat and long-time monarchist officer decided that communism must be good for the people, and became one. He was a remarkable combination of Russian patriot and Communist internationalist. He learned the revolutionary traditions of the American people. This was evident in his murals in San Francisco's George Washington High School. He immersed himself in the history of African-Americans. On our living room wall is his splendid litho portraying Harriet Tubman, the Black 'general' of the Underground Railway. He contributed to the illustrated calendar put out by the Communist-led Graphic Arts Workshop, initially part of the California Labor School. Arnautoff is most easily seen in San Francisco's Coit Tower murals, where he painted an entire wall of city streets and people in the 1930s."

The foregoing is from my autobiography. Today I own six Arnautoff's: three oils, the "Tubman," a watercolor, and a color litho titled "Tricky Dick McSmear." That last is described in a marvelous brand-new art book: AT WORK, The Art of California Labor, which prompted me to do this post. But first I have to tell you how I got "Tricky Dick", of
which the book simply says: "Arnautoff produced a lithograph at the Graphic Arts Workshop caricaturing the young Vice-President Richard Nixon, 'Dick McSmear,' which created a storm when it was censored from the city's 1954 Arts Commission exhibition."

The "McSmear" was a play on (Sen. Joe) McCarthy, and the body was sloppily dressed, as McCarthy was, for a senator. The face was Nixon's. I had been called before McCarthy the previous year, was blacklisted and dead broke. I saw a one-paragraph story in the N.Y. Times about the censorship, and sent Arnautoff a telegram, which then was cheaper than a transcontinental phone call. One paid only for the body, not the address, so I addressed it to Slava Viktoru Arnautovu, which is Russian for "three cheers for Victor Arnautoff," asked him to send me a copy of the litho, and promised to pay when I could.

The book, AT WORK, is companion volume to an exhibition absolutely unprecedented anywhere in this country. It was put together by the California Historical Society, the Art Department of San Francisco State University, and the California Federation of Labor. Works done during the 20th century are at the historical society, which happens to be on Mission St. right around the corner from the S.F. Museum of Modern Art. Those from 2000 on are in the Art Museum of San Francisco State. But fifteen other cities nationwide have been lined up to show the exhibition after it closes in San Francisco.

By William Mandel. The title of my autobiography, SAYING NO TO POWER (Introduction by Howard Zinn), is based on my demolition of Sen. Joe McCarthy and later of HUAC in hearings of 1953 and 1960. It is a history of how the American people fought to defend and expand its rights since the 1920s (I'm 86) employing the form of the life of a 30s AND 60s activist, one who was involved in most serious movements: student, labor, 45 years of efforts to prevent war with the USSR and Cuba, civil rights South and North, women's liberation [my late wife appears on 50 pages], 37 years on Pacifica Radio [where I reinvented talk radio, of whose previous existence I had been unaware], civil liberties, and opposition to anti-Semitism and to Zionism. You may hear/see my testimonies before McCarthy and, later, HUAC on my website, https://www.billmandel.net I am the author of five books in my academic field, have taught at UC Berkeley, and earlier held a postdoctoral fellowship, by invitation, at Stanford's Hoover Institution. The book may be ordered through all normal sources. For an autographed copy, send me $24 at 4466 View Pl.,#106, Oakland, CA. 94611
Showing projects for Artist: Victor Arnautoff

1. Coit Tower “City Life” – San Francisco CA
   The Coit Tower label reads: "Such familiar San Francisco buildings as City Hall, the Main Library, the Legion of Honor, and the Stock Exchange watch over the hectic urban scene, which includes an accident and a robbery." Arnautoff, who was… Read More
   Project type: Art, Mural
   New Deal Agencies: Public Works of Art Project (PWAP)

   The photos below show a series of "buon fresco" murals titled "Life of Washington" by Victor Arnautoff in the school lobby near the main stairway. They depict scenes from the life and times of George Washington. Other murals installed at… Read More
   Project type: Art, Educational, Mural, Schools
   New Deal Agencies: Works Progress Administration (WPA)

3. Pacific Grove Post Office “Lovers’ Point” – Pacific Grove CA
   This 4’ x 15’ oil on canvas depicts an idyllic beach scene.
   Project type: Art, Mural, Post Offices, Public buildings
   New Deal Agencies: Treasury Section of Fine Arts

4. Richmond Post Office “Richmond – Industrial City” – Richmond CA
   This oil on canvas is currently missing.
   Project type: Art, Mural, Post Offices, Public buildings
   New Deal Agencies: Treasury Section of Fine Arts

5. South San Francisco Post Office Mural – South San Francisco CA
"South San Francisco, Past and Present," oil on canvas.

Project type: **Art, Mural, Post Offices, Public buildings**

New Deal Agencies: **Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP)**

6. **The Presidio Mural – San Francisco CA**

“A notable artistic feature of the Main Post Chapel is a large fresco painted in 1935 by Victor Arnautoff and his assistants. With St. Francis at its center, the mural depicts a historical pageant related to the founding of the... Read More

Project type: **Art, Mural, Public buildings**

New Deal Agencies: **State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA)**
In the depths of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt promised a "new deal for the American people". That New Deal took the form of groundbreaking federal policies that put millions of Americans back to work.

The New Deal’s legacy touched cities and towns in every corner of the nation and is enjoyed today, yet it is largely unrecognized. It includes not just roads, tunnels, and bridges but also schools, theaters, hospitals, post offices, courthouses, airports, parks, and works of public art.

Our New Deal project map is the centerpiece of our efforts to identify, and commemorate the physical legacy of the New Deal.
Victor Mikhail Arnautoff papers, 1920-2017, bulk 1920-1953

Arnautoff, Victor Mikhail, 1896-1979
Educator, Artist

Collection Information

Size: 3.3 linear feet

Summary: The papers of artist and art teacher Victor Mikhail Arnautoff measure 3.3 linear feet and date from circa 1920s to 2017 with the bulk of the material dating from the 1920s to the 1940s. The collection contains biographical material such as marriage certificates, passports, naturalization certificates, and an Arnautoff family history; correspondence between family members, as well as with colleagues including Diego Rivera, and with institutions concerning Arnautoff's work; writings about Arnautoff and others, including his statement regarding the House Un-American Activities Committee Hearing; professional records related to mural projects and exhibitions of Arnautoff's work; and printed material including exhibition announcements and catalogs, clippings, and On the Drumhead by Mike Quin, illustrated by Victor Arnautoff. Also included are a scrapbook containing correspondence, printed material, and photographs highlighting Arnautoff's career with particular emphasis on the controversy surrounding his Dix McSmear lithograph, as well as photographic material depicting Arnautoff, other individuals, and works of art. The bulk of the collection is made up of artwork, including sketches, a sketchbook, watercolors, and prints.

Biographical/Historical Note

Victor Mikhail Arnautoff (1896-1979) was a muralist and art teacher in San Francisco, California.

Provenance

The Victor Mikhail Arnautoff papers were donated to the Archives of American Art in 1983 by Jacob and Vasily Arnautoff, Victor Arnautoff's sons. Additional papers were donated in 2018 by Michael and Peter Arnautoff, Victor Arnautoff's son and grandson, and by Robert Cherney, a scholar who wrote a book about Arnautoff.

Funding

Funding for the processing of this collection was provided by Gerald and Bente Buck.
Victor Mikhail Arnaultoff (1896-1979) was an artist and art teacher known for his murals. Arnaultoff was born in the Ukraine and served in the Russian army during World War I. After a defeat in Siberia, he crossed into China, where he remained for five years. In China he met and married his wife Lydia, and they had their first two sons.

In 1925 Arnaultoff went to San Francisco to study at the California School of Fine Arts. He continued with his family to Mexico in 1929 and became an assistant to muralist Diego Rivera. While in Mexico, his third son was born, and Arnaultoff met Bernard Zakheim, with whom he would later work on the Coit Tower murals. Arnaultoff and his family returned to San Francisco in 1931 and in 1934 he was chosen to paint one of the murals at the Coit Tower with funding from the Public Works of Art Project. Arnaultoff was one of the most prolific muralists in San Francisco in the 1930s, completing murals at Coit Tower and the Palo Alto Clinic, as well as the Presidio chapel, George Washington High School, and the California School of Fine Arts library. He also painted murals at five post offices in California and Texas.

Arnaultoff began teaching at the California School of Fine Arts in 1936. He taught at Stanford from 1938 to 1962 and also taught art courses at the California Labor School.

Following the death of his wife in 1961, Arnaultoff retired from teaching at Stanford and returned to the Soviet Union in 1963. While living there he continued to create works of art and published a memoir. He died in Leningrad in 1979.

Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1923-2008
0.5 Linear Feet
Box 1
This series contains correspondence among various family members, personal correspondence to Victor Arnaultoff, and correspondence to Arnaultoff's family about his work after his death. Researchers should note that much of the personal correspondence is in Russian. In some cases, translations of letters (circa 1989) by Lloyd Kramer appear.
Series 3: Writings, 1956, circa 1984-1996
5 folders
Box 1

Writings include Arnoff's statement regarding the House Un-American Activities Committee hearing, a Master's thesis about Arnoff written by Suzanne Lombardi, a biographical essay about Arnoff written by his great-granddaughter, memories of growing up in China and Mexico by Michael Arnoff, and *The Paintings of Emmy Lou Packard* by Diego Rivera.

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**Politics and Humanism in the Depression Era**

Frescoes of Victor Arnoff, Master's Thesis by Suzanne Lombardi, 1984

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**Victor Arnoff and the Politics of Art** by Robert W. Cherny

[Click on books.google link for excerpts/preview]

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Politics And Humanism In The Depression Era Frescoes Of Victor Arnoff

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Author: Suzanne Woodbury Lombardi

Bari Weiss on art destruction

by Greg Mayer

In tomorrow’s New York Times (online now), Bari Weiss writes about a decision by the San Francisco School Board to destroy a mural by Victor Arnautoff, a Russian-American-Russian artist who taught at Stanford from 1938 to 1962.

A portion of the murals slated for destruction at George Washington High School.

Arnautoff led an interesting life. He was a White cavalry officer in the Russian Civil War, a mercenary in China, and, after immigrating to the United States, became an ardent Communist. He repeatedly applied to return to the Soviet Union during the depths of Stalinism, but was denied. During World War II, he became a pro-Russian activist following the falling out between Hitler and Stalin. Finally, the Soviets relented, and he returned to Russia in 1963.

During his long sojourn in California, Arnautoff painted many murals, including a series at George Washington High School in San Francisco. As might be expected from a staunch leftist, the murals are unsentimental– they show that slaves were an economic linchpin of colonial Virginia, and that pioneer expansion meant the death and displacement of the Indians.

Now, these murals are to be destroyed in order to insure that students “are mentally and emotionally feeling safe at their schools,” and because the murals do not reflect “social justice”. Weiss points out the great irony in destroying a work of art that is an explicit
critique of hagiographic and rosy views of Washington and American history in the name of social justice. And, needless to say, it is not white students who are to be made safe from being exposed to Washington’s faults, but rather non-white students who are to be made safe.

Both students and alumni oppose the destruction, and the mindlessness of the Board is made evident when Weiss points out that the vice president of the school’s alumni association, Lope Yap, who is Filipino, is accused of being a “white supremacist”!

Weiss, insightfully in my view, refers to this as an incident of “progressive Puritanism”. The Puritanical mindset, once the province of the right, has now become a mainstay of the woke left: unacceptable opinions and art must be banned.

An aspect of Arnautoff’s life that Weiss does not emphasize is his role in helping establish principles of academic freedom at Stanford University. Arnautoff’s work often contained political statements and social critique, and even, on occasion— heaven forfend!— bare female breasts (the angst over which is another link to Puritanism), and thus led to controversy. His Washington murals were in this style. Historian Robert Cherny describes them this way:

In the murals, Arnautoff implicitly challenged the version of U.S. history then typical in American high schools. In depicting Mount Vernon, Arnautoff literally marginalized Washington and put enslaved African Americans in the center of one of the scenes. The mural presented a counter-narrative to most high-school histories of the time, which tended to ignore the existence of slaves at Mount Vernon, as well as the paradox of slaveholders fighting for the principle that all men are created equal. Another large mural presents Washington pointing the nation to the West. Again, however, Arnautoff’s counter-narrative makes it dramatically clear that the way west was over the body of a dead Indian.

A lithograph entitled DIX McSmear, caricaturing then Vice President Richard Nixon and McCarthyism, was removed from the San Francisco Art Festival. Eventually, Arnautoff was investigated by both Stanford University and the House Un-American Activities Committee (which Arnautoff cheekily referred to as the “Un-American Sub-Committee”). In a response to the Committee, Arnautoff wrote

Do they [the Committee] consider an artist’s colors, brushes, crayons and pencils as murderous tools? If they do, it is a new low in right-wing thinking, and it is time for the
American people—and especially for American artists—to be concerned with a threat that affects everyone as fully as it does me. I value my freedoms, and I intend to defend my rights as a citizen and as an artist, and to express my belief in American principles in the future as I have in the past.

Stanford instigated a second investigation of Arnautoff after this. Detailed records no longer exist, but Arnautoff apparently scored a major victory. Not only was he neither disciplined nor dismissed by Stanford, he got a 15.5% raise! (Arnautoff had raised the issue of low salaries for humanities faculty during the investigation.)

Cherny summarizes, “The lack of any suggestion of incompetence or bias in Arnautoff’s teaching effectively undercut the arguments of those who claimed that a [Communist] party member was inevitably an incompetent teacher.”

And when a while later local papers criticized Arnautoff, Stanford now came to his defense:

The right of free speech and free thought is a very important part of a strong democracy; it is easy to lose this privilege if we do not defend the right of people to hold views which differ radically from those held by most of us.

In Arnautoff’s heyday he was attacked by the right; now he is attacked by alleged leftists. But his critics share the same Puritanical mindset. Arnautoff is perhaps not an unmixed hero— a Stalinist who demanded the rights of an American while secretly renouncing his American citizenship so as to return to the Soviet Union— but in his defense of art and academic freedom, he was absolutely right. As Churchill said, if Hitler invaded hell, he would at least say something nice about the Devil in the Commons.


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Washington High School and the WPA