

June 19, 2020

Supervisor Aaron Peskin
Chair, Land Use and Transportation Committee
San Francisco Board of Supervisors
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place, Room 244
San Francisco, CA 94102

Supervisor Peskin:

San Francisco Heritage adamantly opposes the destruction of Bernard Zakheim's ten-panel mural series, *History of Medicine in California*, on the walls of Toland Hall at the Parnassus campus of the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). While housed on state property, we ask the Board of Supervisors to pursue every option to safeguard this important part of San Francisco history, including emergency City Landmark designation.

Zakheim is among the leading New Deal-era muralists of the region and one of the first to use *buon fresco*, a medium that came to be identified with New Deal public murals. A protégé of Diego Rivera, Zakheim's work can be found in Coit Tower and the city's Alemany Emergency Hospital. Created between 1935 and 1938, *History of Medicine* represents his largest single project, celebrated by UCSF only five years ago as "the jewel of the University's Art Collection." Now, with a new research and academic building planned, the administration claims preserving the series is cost-prohibitive, this despite being able to fundraise for more than \$4 billion in charitable gifts over the past three years.

San Francisco Heritage has commissioned the San Francisco New Deal-era Historic Context Statement and is a champion of the city's diverse public art and its role in defining the historical identity of our city and state. The New Deal context statement details the origins, history, and progressive ideals of Zakheim, his Toland Hall mural cycle, and its depictions. Important works such as *History of Medicine in California* are not only significant artistically but engage with historical perspectives and social issues that still resonate today.

Heritage condemns the proposed destruction of the murals and is committed to working with UCSF to live up to its responsibility as stewards of this irreplaceable, publicly commissioned artwork.

Sincerely,



Mike Buhler
President & CEO

cc: Mayor London Breed
Members of the Board of Supervisors
Members of the Historic Preservation Commission
Rich Hillis, Director, San Francisco Planning

Jewish muralist's historic work faces demolition at UCSF

By [Laura Paull](#) | June 18, 2020

By [Laura Paull](#) | June 18, 2020



Large panel from Bernard Zakheim's "History of Medicine in California." (Photo/Courtesy UCSF Archives & Special Collections)

How does a significant piece of public art go from being the “jewel of the University’s art collection” to a work designated for the wrecking ball in just five years?

That is the question the descendants of the 20th-century Jewish artist Bernard Zakheim are asking UCSF Medical Center, which on June 4 sent a legal letter to a member of the family saying that the murals he painted in the 1930s could be destroyed in a process that could begin in 90 days.

The 10-panel series “[History of Medicine in California](#),” which Zakheim

produced between 1935 and 1938, was commissioned by UCSF and partly funded by the Works Project Administration. Installed in Toland Hall, a lecture room inside UC Hall, the vivid images of doctors, lab scientists, suffering and recovered patients have been studied by generations of medical students — except for one 20-year period after a particular professor objected that the art was a distraction from the lectures and the university wallpapered it over.

Since freed from that censorship, for decades the university has promoted the art as a visual symbol of its humanistic values. In 2015, as part of the institution's 150th anniversary, the [public was allowed to tour](#) the murals, and UCSF archivist Polina Ilieva wrote a blog describing them as “the jewel of the University's art collection.”

Physicians on the faculty have recorded lectures elucidating the details of the murals to classes and the public, including a 1996 presentation in which Dr. Robert Schindler lauds the murals as “the product of an extraordinary individual.”

But now that UC Hall is scheduled to be torn down starting in 2022 to make way for a 27,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art research and academic building — part of a multiyear, multibillion [overhaul](#) of the Parnassus campus, paid for in part by a [\\$500 million gift](#) from the Helen Diller Foundation — those values have come into question.

“Up until very recently my impression was that the UCSF administration understood the value of the murals as history and as art and wanted to preserve and conserve them,” said Robert Cherny, professor emeritus of history at San Francisco State and author of “Victor Arnautoff and the Politics of Art” and many articles about the artists of the New Deal era, including Zakheim. “An earlier plan was to convert Toland Hall into a community center so that more of the public could see the murals. The new plan is an abrupt turnaround by the university administration.”

Zakheim, a major artist of the period who immigrated from Poland to San Francisco in 1920 and studied fresco technique and painting with Mexican artist Diego Rivera, already had made a name for himself as a muralist when UCSF commissioned the work. Most notably, he had spearheaded the 1934 [Coit Tower mural project](#), which resulted in murals by 25 local artists depicting California life.

But of all Zakheim's output, the massive [Toland Hall murals](#) are his largest single work, Cherny said.

According to Nathan Zakheim, his father "considered those to be his greatest murals. They are extremely powerful works."

Cherny regards Bernard Zakheim as "one of most prominent of the New Deal artists; I'd place him in a group of the top three on the Pacific Coast, with Victor Arnautoff and Lucien Labaudt, who painted the Beach Chalet mural."

Zakheim was also a Jewish artist with "a commitment to Jewish culture," Cherny said.

Leah Royall, one of Zakheim's granddaughters, remembers him as "a character" who spoke five languages in addition to his native Polish.

"In his dusty house on the Sebastopol property that he called Farm Arts, he'd stomp around singing Yiddish songs. He used to glue articles from the Jewish Bulletin [now J.] into his typewritten letters to us and he loved talking politics. This was a man who opposed 'art for art's sake' — life and his art were informed by his left-wing political convictions," Royall told J.

In 1933, Zakheim created the mural "The Wedding Ceremony" for the JCC of San Francisco. When the old building was torn down for a new one that opened in 2004, the Zakheim family fought for the work's preservation, and the JCC ultimately agreed to remove the mural and reintegrate it into the new facility.

Erasing artwork that is historically significant to both San Francisco and California stands in stark contrast to the university's original vision.

In its letter to Nathan Zakheim, as well as in an official statement explaining its proposal to replace UC Hall, UCSF cited the conclusions of two historic preservation firms that the removal of the murals prior to demolition would result in irreparable damage to the works.

“UCSF has decided not to use public funds to physically preserve the murals, especially at a time when the UC system faces financial challenges in the wake of Covid-19. This decision in no way has to do with any complaints about the murals,” the university said in its official statement. After requesting additional comment from the administration, J. was referred back to the statement.

The UCSF letter offered the Zakheim family a 90-day period to submit a proposal to remove the murals at their own expense, after which the university said it would make a public announcement calling for other proposals to remove and take possession of the murals within an additional 120 days.

The university's estimate of the cost of removal is around \$8 million.

Nathan Zakheim, 76, an art conservator based in Los Angeles, says that figure is unnecessarily high. In phone conversations with Brian Newman, UCSF's senior associate vice chancellor in charge of campus space planning, design, construction and management, the artist's elder son said he believed he could get the job done for under \$1 million. The ace up his sleeve is the fact that his father taught him how to remove the murals during the time when they worked together to remove and restore two other murals in UCSF's Cole Hall

in 1967.

“These murals can be removed,” Cherny concurs. “Bernard Zakheim foresaw that eventuality and planned for it, and taught Nathan the technique. That is what the UCSF administration doesn’t seem to acknowledge.”



Bernard Zakheim with son Nathan in 1967 discussing mural removal and restoration at UCSF. (Photo/Courtesy UCSF Archives & Special Collections)

The far-flung family of Zakheim’s descendants have united in a response to the university that prioritizes the preservation of the murals.

“Ninety days is an unreasonable amount of time, and the clock is already ticking,” said Zakheim grandson Adam Gottstein, 64. “I don’t want to get into the politics of it; my hyperfocus is to find a resolution that will save the work from demolition.”

Zakheim's daughter, 97-year-old Ruth Gottstein, a lifelong social activist and former independent publisher, dictated an irate letter from her assisted-living facility in Jackson, Amador County.

“It is egregious to me that people today assign themselves the moral right to decide what should happen to these historic and irreplaceable pieces of art. They were painted in 1935! These were the thoughts and principles of the artists at that time. To destroy them is to willfully ignore what was taking place in our world and arbitrarily erase significant portions of our history and evolution. Nobody has that kind of authority. Nobody.”

She called the university's offer to commission a “three-dimensional digital recording” of the artwork in lieu of preserving the physical murals “a travesty.”

Ruth Gottstein's niece, Bethany Stark, “took umbrage” at the university's *a priori* decision to destroy the murals unless the family took them away.

“These are works that have artistic, historical and community value,” Stark said by phone from L.A. “They belong to the community, to the public and to the university. The murals are not just some antique chair that they can say, ‘It doesn't work anymore, do you want it back?’”

Royall, an editor in London, shared the outrage, describing the university's decision as “criminal short-sightedness.”

“Erasing artwork that is historically significant to both San Francisco and California stands in stark contrast to the university's original vision,” Royall said.

Ruth Gottstein also says that the history, ideas and research integrated into the murals continue to provide value for present and future generations.

“At a time of a global health care-based pandemic,” she points out, “the need for the ‘messaging’ in my father's works in Toland Hall are ironically more

applicable today than ever.”

“It is my hope that we can extend the deadline in order to come up with a collaborative solution to save my grandfather’s murals,” Adam Gottstein wrote in his own June 15 letter to UCSF.

Arts and preservation organizations and concerned individuals around the city are rousing to the cause. On June 23, S.F. Supervisor Aaron Peskin plans to introduce a resolution to the Board of Supervisors to designate landmark status to the murals. The motion would then have to be taken up by the Historic Preservation Commission and the Planning Department. While such a designation would not legally protect the murals, because the university is a state institution, “I wouldn’t initiate this process if I didn’t believe the murals merit protection, and I hope this symbolic action helps to bring the university to its senses,” Peskin told J.

Meanwhile, Nathan Zakheim says his ongoing discussions with the university have been good so far.

“I’m not approaching this as an activist,” he said. “I’m a technician. I know how to take murals off walls, and that’s what I want to do.”

UCSF New Deal murals could be destroyed

Local // Bay Area & State



1of4Professor Robert Schindler talks about murals painted by artist Bernard Zakheim on the UCSF Parnassus campus in 2015. Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle 2015



2of4Murals painted by Bernard Zakheim may be destroyed as UCSF plans to build a hospital.Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle 2015

3of4The murals featured UCSF staff and faculty, including Lucy Wanzer, the first woman to graduate from the school.Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle 2015



4of4The murals date back to the New Deal era.Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle 2015

A series of celebrated New Deal-era murals on the UCSF Parnassus campus could be destroyed unless someone comes up with as much as \$8 million that the school says would be needed to safely move and preserve the artwork.

In 2015, UCSF invited members of the public into a lecture hall on the campus to see what it described as the “crown jewel” of its art collection: a series of New Deal-era [frescoes](#) depicting the history of medicine in California.

Art history buffs flocked to see the murals, which were painted in the 1930s by Diego Rivera collaborator Bernard Zakheim. Emeritus professor of medicine Dr. Robert Schindler called the murals “enormously significant.”

Five years later, however, the future of the artwork is uncertain as UCSF prepares to knock down UC Hall, where the 10 frescoes are located, as part of an ambitious plan to build a new 1.5 million-square-foot hospital and research campus there.

In a statement, UCSF spokeswoman Jennifer O'Brien said the university doesn't have the \$8 million it would cost to move the artwork to a new building, and moving the "fragile murals would likely cause irreparable damage," she said.

"Based on these factors, UCSF has decided not to use public funds to physically preserve the murals, especially at a time when the UC system faces financial challenges in the wake of COVID-19," she said.

Instead the university will hire a digital preservation firm to "create a three-dimensional digital recording of the murals that would be prominently highlighted in an interpretive virtual reality exhibit on campus."

O'Brien said the school has reached out to Nathan Zakheim, the 76-year-old son of the artist, to see if the family would like to remove the murals "at their own expense." The family has 90 days to submit a detailed proposal for how the murals would be removed from the building and preserved. If they do not submit a plan, UCSF will issue a public request for proposals to see if any other individual or group is interested in taking them. If no one responds to that, the murals would be destroyed.

Nathan Zakheim accused the university of "railroading" his family. Zakheim, an art conservator based in Los Angeles, said that the \$8 million estimate was "grossly inflated" and that he could do it for \$1 million. He suggested that UCSF should "design a square room in the new campus" specifically for the artwork or put it in the library.

"It is a magnificent, unparalleled historic document," said Zakheim.

"It's a key part of the university's history and a key part of San Francisco's history. If they don't care about that, well, it's ridiculous," he added.

He also said that UCSF administrators had told him that some students and faculty members had complained about the content of the work, particularly

the way that Native Americans and Spanish missionaries are depicted.

Bernard Zakheim's work in San Francisco

Zakheim was a Polish-born San Francisco muralist, best known for his work on the Coit Tower murals. In the early 1930s, he committed himself to the preservation and interpretation of Jewish American life and culture through the making of art. He was one of the organizers of a Yiddish school in the Fillmore District, back when that neighborhood was largely Jewish. He helped found the San Francisco Artists and Writers Union, which lobbied for government arts funding. Eventually that led to the funding of Zakheim's work in Coit Tower.

In San Francisco, Zakheim's artwork can be found at UCSF's Parnassus campus, the lobby of Coit Tower and the San Francisco Jewish Community Center. He also painted murals inside the former Alemany Health Center.

"The Jewish Wedding," 1933

Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, 3200 California St.

"Library," 1934

Coit Tower, 1 Telegraph Hill Blvd.

"Community Spirit," "Growth," 1934

Former Alemany Health Center building, 35-45 Onondaga Ave.

"History of Medicine in California," "Modern Medicine," "Ancient Medicine: Superstition in Medicine," 1940

UCSF Parnassus Campus, 505 Parnassus Ave.

O'Brien said the subject matter of the murals had nothing to do with the decision to attempt to find a new home for them.

Robert Cherny, an emeritus professor of history at San Francisco State University, said the decision to jettison the murals surprised him, especially since the school seemed enthusiastic about the artwork in the past.

“They seem to be very proud of the murals and very much wanted to share them,” he said. “It’s a big turnaround for the UCSF administration. To me this is just somebody in the UCSF administration saying, ‘We don’t want to bother.’ It’s a very cavalier disregard for both history and art.”

In total Zakheim painted 12 murals at UCSF in 1930s: the 10-panel “History of Medicine in California” and two-panel “Modern Medicine” and “Ancient Medicine: Superstition in Medicine” in the Health Sciences West lecture halls. The latter two works are not threatened with removal.

There is precedent for rescuing Zakheim’s mural art. The Jewish Community Center of San Francisco [saved a 1933 fresco](#), “The Jewish Wedding,” when constructing its current building, and unveiled the restored work in 2004. The Zakheim family assisted in the restoration effort.

J.K. Dineen is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: jdineen@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@sfjkdineen](https://twitter.com/sfjkdineen)

We're tracking COVID-19 in the Bay Area

Sign up for updates and in-depth local reporting.

By subscribing, you agree to our [Terms of use](#) and acknowledge that your information will be used as described in our [Privacy Policy](#).