

Executive Summary

Reframe: City Hall Mural Phase I Report

The City of Santa Monica Acknowledge + Reframe Together (Reframe) Initiative centers community voices with the aim of creating a more just and equitable Santa Monica. Through a deliberative and collaborative process, each Reframe project starts with community members who have been historically excluded from discourse about representation in civic spaces, especially communities of color. Reframe utilizes a combination of art, storytelling and deep community engagement, and results in the production of public art and civic memory projects.

This report is the culmination of Phase I of **Reframe: City Hall Mural**, summarizing the process of community engagement and subsequent community recommendations.

Background



The Working Circle meets at Historic Santa Monica City Hall lobby. Photo: Kenneth Lopez, Meztl Projects

The Reframe: City Hall Mural project emerged from protest and debates around the Stanton MacDonal-Wright mural in the lobby of Historic Santa Monica City Hall entitled *History of Santa Monica and the Bay District*. The mural has long been a point of controversy, but in 2015 a renewed effort brought public criticism for its depiction of First Peoples and settlers and its portrayal of 1930s Santa Monica as an affluent, all-white, predominantly male, center of leisure.

Starting the Process

The City of Santa Monica began work on addressing longstanding concerns around the WPA-era mural in the lobby of Historic City Hall with direction from the Arts Commission in 2018. This direction informed initial planning for the project and included a 5-point plan of committee work, programming, and funding for new artwork commissions to address the mural. These were:

1. Form a Mural Subcommittee. The Subcommittee will inform and guide the planning process managed by City staff (formed in November 2018).
2. Issue an Art Bank call specifically requesting artworks that respond to Indigenous or other often overlooked histories of Santa Monica (resulting in the *Lives that Bind* exhibit in City Hall East).
3. Coordinate a panel discussion series that will host open public dialogues with experts from diverse perspectives including Indigenous Peoples, History, and Art (executed by Meztli Projects as part of Phase I).
4. Commission a temporary participatory artwork in City Hall to collect community voices (evolved into the Meztli Projects Phase I lobby display and feedback activity).
5. Informed by the community engagement and panels series, commission a permanent educational panel or other artistic interpretation at City Hall to recontextualize the Macdonald-Wright mural (part of the recommendations included in this report by Meztli Projects arising from the community engagement process of Phase I).

City Council Direction

In the midst of the Arts Commission's recontextualization work, Public Works Department staff received additional direction from the City Council in May 2021 to install a temporary scrim to cover the mural prior to the return to City Hall for in person, public meetings.

Simultaneously, the Arts Commission and Cultural Affairs were directed to initiate a community engagement and education process around the representations depicted in the mural, as well as "engaging an artist to recontextualize the mural with artwork that does not whitewash our past but rather celebrates the diverse history of Santa Monica's people, culture and its renewed commitment to acknowledging the movement for equity, justice and respect for all."

The Mural Ad Hoc Committee was appointed by Council on September 28, 2021 to serve as liaisons to the Landmarks and Arts Commissions to help guide the process to recontextualize the mural. Following the community process and informed by community input, the Ad Hoc Committee was tasked to return to the full City Council with a set of recommendations for Council consideration (this report). The adopted recommendations would then inform an RFP to engage an artist or artist team to produce and install artistic recontextualization(s). This phase was overseen by the Arts Commission under its authority as custodians of the City's public art collection.

In February 2022, Council directed staff to no longer install a temporary scrim over the Stanton Macdonald-Wright mural in the lobby and instead directed staff "to launch a process that engages and educates the community and results in the addition of artwork within the lobby to create a more inclusive and complete story of the City's history and vision for the future" and directed staff to "explore the creation of a temporary lobby display around the themes that will be explored during the larger community education and engagement process."

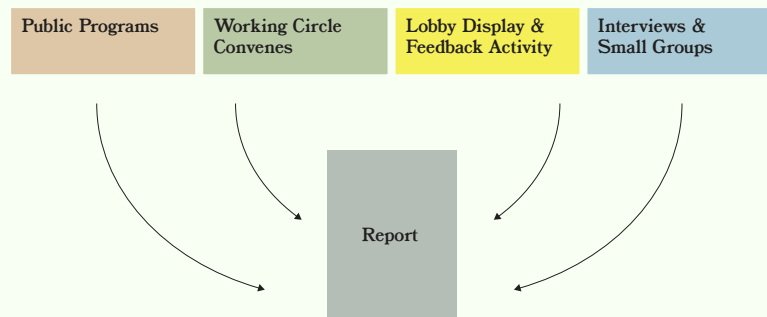
Cultural Affairs contracted with consultants Meztli Projects in 2022 to design a City Hall Mural project Phase I to engage Santa Monica community members in conversations both in general around representation and belonging, and with the specific questions arising from the lobby mural.

Method

The **Meztli Projects facilitation team** is composed of four artists, curators, and researchers: Joel Garcia, Robin Garcia, Susannah Laramée Kidd and Rosten Woo. Meztli was selected by the City for its novel approach and expertise in public art, qualitative research, experience working with Indigenous communities, expansive community engagement strategies, and most importantly, for its deep involvement in emerging conversations around authentic and new approaches to public memory and commemoration at a local, regional and national levels.

Meztli Projects' approach to the work:

- A **“Working Circle”** focus group composed of 13 individuals with strong ties to very different parts of Santa Monica that committed to attend public programs as well as meet as a cohort to act as an advisory body and think tank for six months. At the end of this process, the Working Circle discussed actions that could be taken in response to the mural. Their discussions informed the recommendations in this report.
- A series of **Public Programs** on relevant themes including a bus tour of sites of memory; virtual and in-person panel discussions about art, civic memory and alternate histories of Santa Monica; a virtual tour of relevant educational resources; a reflective listening workshop and a screening of the documentary *Town Destroyer*. Additionally, they created programming through the perspective of First Peoples as a starting point to engage issues of equity and inclusion.
- The creation and installation of **Lobby Displays** in Historic City Hall that explained the project and presented updates to City Hall visitors.
- A **Feedback Activity** to survey members of the public about their perceptions of the mural and spark ideas for new public artworks.
- **Interviews and Small Group Engagements** with a broad spectrum of individuals who have a stake in the mural conversation or have voiced opinions about it, subject matter experts, and local content experts. Meztli also visited existing community meetings and had one-on-one conversations with targeted constituencies.



Over six months, the team produced 8+ public programs, conducted 15 interviews with key stakeholders, surveyed over 300 people across Santa Monica, and convened a Working Circle made up of 13 individuals with ties to distinct communities and diverse perspectives on Santa Monica's history and public art. The Working Circle engaged one another in an ongoing deep group process to learn together and ultimately develop and prioritize recommendations.

The Working Circle met a total of 13 times as a group – 4 of these were in person, with the rest taking place on Zoom. Working Circle members also attended the public programs when possible. Meetings were facilitated to create an environment that would allow trust to grow, make sure that all members felt that they had space to speak, and create a “brave” space where members ask difficult questions, and bring their authentic perspective. Meztli prioritized small group breakout discussions, as well as a “circle” format intended to make sure everyone had equal opportunity to speak.

The public programs explored themes of Indigeneity, art history, innovative civic memory projects, local sites of memory, alternative archives and public history projects based in Santa Monica, reflective listening and healing through story, and related controversies about public art and history. At each of these events, Meztli found an audience that was fully engaged by the topic and often eager to voice their opinions on the mural. Meztli was focused on expanding the conversation to engage a larger landscape of questions and concerns around inclusion, repair, civic memory and public space.

Meztli also conducted extensive research using archival materials and interviews with content experts. The findings from each of these kinds of engagement can be found in the following report.

About the Mural



Detail of the mural “History of Santa Monica and the Bay District” by Stanton Macdonald-Wright, 1939. Southwest panel shown to the left, northwest panel shown to the right. Photos: Kenneth Lopez, Meztli Projects

History of Santa Monica and the Bay District is a “petrachrome” (similar to terrazzo) mural installed on the interior walls of the lobby of Santa Monica’s City Hall building, designed by Stanton Macdonald-Wright, an American artist who spent his early years in Santa Monica. The mural was commissioned through the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Federal Art Project. Macdonald-Wright also acted as the administrator of the WPA project’s Southern California division, supervising numerous other artists and their projects. Macdonald-Wright’s mural was completed in 1939 along with the building itself. The City of Santa Monica owns the mural and it is part of the City’s public art collection. Santa Monica City Hall was landmarked in 1979 and the mural was mentioned in the designation. In 2011, the exterior of City Hall was given a supplemental landmark designation.

It appears Macdonald-Wright had no outside guidance or oversight over the content, considering the complete absence of archival materials relating to the mural. Typically, mural artists would be asked to submit drawings and sketches before being permitted to produce and install public projects. The City Hall mural has almost no paper trail, suggesting that Macdonald-Wright, because he was both artist and commissioner, did not submit any concepts, written descriptions, drawings or plans to any oversight body.

Macdonald-Wright did speak explicitly about the mural in an interview about the objects, places, and figures in the southwest side: Will Rogers and his polo field, automobile racing on San Vicente or Wilshire Blvd, the Douglas Building, Harry M. Gorham, tennis players May Sutton and Tom Bundy, as well as the artist's own dogs.

There are no recorded descriptions of who or what Macdonald-Wright was intending to render on the northwest side of the mural. We can only speculate about who or what is depicted, outside of the mural's general title: *History of Santa Monica and the Bay District*.

It is mostly agreed that the northwest panel includes depictions of a Franciscan monk (most likely Father Serra); a man with a helmet (possibly Gaspar de Portolá); a figure on horseback (which could represent the Spanish period or an extension of the Portolá expedition); waterfalls (perhaps Kuruvungna Springs); and the two figures on the bottom right, who are intended to be Indigenous people.

The largest point of interpretive contention is whether the overall scene presented is objectionable. Throughout this process, Meztli encountered three different major kinds of objections and three major defenses regarding the First Peoples' portrayal.



Detail of the City Hall mural. Photo: Kenneth Lopez, Meztli Projects

Objections

1. The figures are showing deference or subservience to the conquerors. This portrayal is traumatic to survivors of generational violence because it depicts a triumphant moment of subjugation.
2. The figures are showing collaboration and goodwill towards their soon-to-be oppressors. This portrayal is traumatic not only because it erases a history of extreme violence and cruelty but suggests that Native people welcomed it.
3. The figures are generally shown as less than the other white/Spanish figures and whether they are revered or vilified, they are not portrayed as real humans or on the same level as one another.

Defenses

1. The figures are shown in a way that honors Native people, because they relate to the earth, look strong, or their posture might reference East Asian figures such as bodhisattvas.
2. The figures are helpful because they acknowledge that people lived here before European invasion.
3. The figures are neutral and just happen to be in the higher and lower positions they are in because it makes a dynamic composition. The figures may or may not even be having an interaction.

These interpretations cannot be resolved definitively. While some viewers feel no offense at seeing these images, it is beyond debate that many other viewers most certainly do and feel very harmed by them.

Summary of Feedback

Through a public feedback activity, Meztli had people engage directly with the mural images to understand not just how they interpreted the images, but also their emotional responses and attachments to the mural. They collected feedback activity responses from February 6, 2023, through May 10, 2023 and received 337 responses to the feedback activity.

The mural images are offensive, disturbing, or exclusionary. A majority of the respondents found one or both of the mural panels to be offensive, disturbing, or exclusionary. Overall, these respondents felt that the mural represented the hierarchies inherent in settler colonialism and white supremacy. In the northwest panels, they noted the lower position of the Native figures and the difference in detail in facial expressions and clothing between the European and Native figures. They reacted to the fact that the colonizing figures are shown facing the viewer in active positions (mid-stride). Many people read the images as representing the Native figures in a subservient position and noted that they appear to be faceless or turned away from the viewer.

In response to the southwest panels, respondents overwhelmingly noted the fact all the figures represented are white and appear to be upper class. Many noted that there is only one woman represented in either panel, and she also does not have facial detail. Children felt they were not adequately represented either. Many respondents found this “recreation” panel to be the more problematic image in its representation of white elitism. Especially paired with the northwest panel and as a representation of “Santa Monica of the 1930s/present day,” it appears to suggest an erasure of both Indigenous people and anyone non-white in a contemporary Santa Monica.

The mural images are beautiful or valuable, but also contain troubling aspects that need addressing. Another, smaller group of respondents appreciated the mural for its artistic or historical significance, but also recognized that the images have significant flaws that require a response. Many of these respondents found the images beautiful, particularly the natural landscape depicted and how the images coordinate with the tile work and other architectural elements of the City Hall lobby. These respondents often placed a value on historic preservation, and some were aware of the New Deal origins of the artwork or other pieces by the artist. However, the concerns articulated by these respondents mirrored the concerns of the larger group of respondents who found the images particularly lacking in terms of Native representation and missing large groups of Santa Monicans.

The mural images are beautiful and there is nothing wrong with them. A roughly similarly sized group of respondents felt that the mural is perfect, and nothing needs to be done to address it. Many of these respondents provided less detail in their responses, but they have mostly positive or neutral interpretations of what is depicted in both panels. A few have negative interpretations but feel strongly that the images are still beautiful or valuable because of their historic significance. This group might have some minor suggestions about what is missing or how the images could be improved, but these suggestions, if they have them, are in the realm of “quibbles.” They are not offended by the mural. Quite the contrary, overall, the artwork makes these respondents feel happy or proud, and some have very strong attachments to the mural.

The mural images are neutral or negative, but as historical artifacts, they have little bearing on the present. Another roughly similarly sized group of respondents was somewhat indifferent about the artworks. Some of them interpreted the images as having negative or exclusionary elements, but they were not particularly concerned about the images. As historic images were created in the past, some felt that these images are either unrelatable or have

little import for today. Some felt that because they are historic images, they cannot or should not be changed.

The discussion about the mural is a distraction from other pressing issues in Santa Monica. A small number of respondents felt that the process of engagement around the mural was a waste of time and resources. They would have preferred that Santa Monica spent those resources addressing quality-of-life concerns and development pressures. Some of these respondents also expressed their strong attachment to the mural. Others were more indifferent or felt the mural had no bearing on the present.

Shared Values

While no group of such diverse people will ever agree on everything, there was substantial agreement about values among the Working Circle members and the following values helped drive the discussion about the recommendations in this report.

The Working Circle members were unanimous in their belief that Santa Monica should:

- Center Santa Monica First Peoples in the City's response to the mural.
- Do something concrete, not just words.

Nearly unanimously, the group felt it was important to:

- Center working class people and other people of color in the City's response to the mural.
- Make sure visitors to City Hall know that the City understands the issues that people have with the mural.
- Make sure visitors to City Hall know that the City condemns the white supremacy worldview depicted in the mural.
- Make sure everyone who visits the Historic City Hall lobby feels welcome/like they belong.

And about three-quarters of the group felt it was important to:

- Attend to the people who feel harmed by the mural.
- Address the material consequences of colonialism and provide considerations including financial considerations to Santa Monica First Peoples.
- Protect future visitors to City Hall from the harm of seeing demeaning images.
- Create new opportunities for artists.
- Have the City response deal with other things in addition to the mural.
- Generate meaningful public discussion and engagement around the mural.

Note About Actions to Remove or Cover the Mural

The harm that this mural has caused is important and considerable, and removing or covering the mural would guard against continuing this harm. However, removal or covering does not address the harm that has already been done. Therefore, the immediate and urgent focus should be on actions that move towards repair for the communities harmed, such as those we have laid out in these recommendations.

Our Working Circle discussions supported this direction, even though some in the Working Circle would still like to see the mural removed. Several Working Circle members reflected at the end of the process that they believed, knowing

more about the histories represented in the mural and the history of the mural, that simply removing the mural would be letting the City “off the hook” for tacitly endorsing the images by letting them remain unaddressed for so long. This was a concern that was echoed by some throughout our engagement process, including City of Santa Monica employees, feedback activity respondents, and interviewees.

Just as the Council reversed their decision to cover the mural so that the mural would be visible during the process of public engagement, continuing to leave the mural up and uncovered can provide further opportunities to engage and address the harm that mural has caused. However, leaving it up does create an ongoing risk of continued harm if no other actions are taken. As a result, the Working Circle members were in strong agreement that the City should NOT “do nothing” with the mural, nor should the City sell or cover it at this time.

In addition, Santa Monica First Peoples are clearly among the most impacted by this artwork, but the process to remove and or cover the mural was not initiated by them. When advocacy efforts such as these are not rooted in the community that faces the biggest impacts by any issue (in this case First Peoples), they are burdened with uncompensated emotional, cultural, and intellectual labor that responds to the issue raised within a frame that First Peoples did not help construct. Not removing the mural offers an opportunity for First Peoples to uplift these issues from their perspective so that the outcomes and futurity of their reflections are driven by them. Many of the recommendations in this report speak to the reparative actions community members signaled were of utmost importance and were possible while keeping the mural in place for the time being.

Therefore, the City should make clear commitments to addressing the mural, including reasons for leaving the mural on display. This could include taking full accountability for the mural and making the lobby a space to publicly and clearly condemn the attitudes made manifest by the mural.

Recommendations

[Recommendation 1:](#)

Commission new artwork in City Hall lobby

This emerged as the highest priority. The art should present history from different perspectives and celebrate and reframe what is traditionally presented as “historically significant.” City Hall is a center of power, and the new work needs to balance or redress the exclusions exemplified in the existing mural. The new work should address the hierarchies in the southwest panels as well—Black, Brown, Asian American, working-class people, unemployed people, and poor people who were in Santa Monica in 1939 and deal with themes of ongoing Indigenous presence in Santa Monica. The new work should create a welcoming environment for Indigenous people, working-class people, and people of color.

[Recommendation 2:](#)

Commission new interpretive panels

The City should create interpretive panels that condemn colonization, forced religious conversion, white supremacy generally and the mural’s portrayal of First Peoples in particular. These panels should be written by an advisory group including an Indigenous person and other people of color and should be at a scale and placement that is unmissable for viewers of the mural, ideally installed in close visual proximity.

[Recommendation 3:](#)

Ensure that Santa Monica’s public art and commemorative landscape centers equity and belonging

The Reframe: City Hall Mural process should be the beginning of a series of steps taken by the City of Santa Monica to revisit the policies and processes that govern public artwork and civic memory, including processes to support emerging and underrepresented artists in receiving new commissions. As part of this, the City should conduct a survey of the existing public art, monuments and sites of civic memory throughout Santa Monica, so that gaps and opportunities can be identified. The City should also commission new artwork on the theme of inclusion and representing other views of Santa Monica’s history in a location that is much more publicly visible and meaningful.

[Recommendation 4:](#)

Create additional educational materials about the mural

Many believe that the mural can serve an educational purpose. All agreed that this would be a deep challenge and not something to be taken on lightly. Many felt that City staff are ill-equipped to do this work and would need substantive partnerships with other institutions to make this meaningful. This is a good opportunity for Santa Monica to invest in the creative and scholarly development of underrepresented communities.

BEYOND THE MURAL AND NEW ARTWORK

There was an extremely high level of agreement amongst the Working Circle that the City’s response should not be limited to actions related to the cultural sphere or the City Hall Lobby and that the City should act to materially address issues related to the exclusions seen in the mural. Centering the perspectives of First Peoples and “doing something concrete” were highly rated values consistent with the following recommendations. Implementation of the following recommendations would require collaboration and resources and may be considered in the context of developing a Citywide Equity Plan.

[Recommendation 5:](#)

Expand DEI+ trainings for City staff

City should build on actions taken since its Racial Equity Statement of 2020, which included the formation of an Office of Equity and Inclusion and the subsequent launch of an Equity Plan process. It should expand DEI training for all City staff. To be successful, future efforts should focus on implementation strategies and tools for staff, moving away from a white worldview and centering the overlapping experiences, shared spaces and mutual accountability of underrepresented peoples.

[Recommendation 6:](#)

Adopt a Citywide land/territory acknowledgment initiative

Land Acknowledgements, although extremely important, can become diluted as these acknowledgments are the bare minimum of the protocols from which they originate. Santa Monica has an opportunity to adopt a city-wide land acknowledgment initiative that includes the actionable practices such as a new Indigenous Advisory Council (IAC) to help advise its decision-makers on issues similar to those raised through Reframe.

[Recommendation 7:](#)

Improve representation on Santa Monica committees

As of the writing of this report there are no First Peoples serving as part of the Arts Commission or Landmarks Commission, among other bodies. Some of the issues raised from the City Hall Mural could have been mitigated if members of the communities excluded from and/or misrepresented in the mural had been included in these kinds of decision-making bodies.

[Recommendation 8:](#)

Facilitate Land Back in Santa Monica

There is an opportunity for Santa Monica to develop creative ways for First Peoples communities to practice sovereignty and self-determination. Santa Monica could partner with First Peoples to create opportunities for their members to return home.

[Recommendation 9:](#)

Facilitate Kuruvungna Springs relationships

While not in Santa Monica, Working Circle members had strong agreement that the City of Santa Monica continue to build relationships with the Kuruvungna Springs Foundation and support their efforts to have the land transferred back to them.

The mural and the controversy around it have created a rare and critical focal point of civic energy. The key is not to squander the moment and let it further perpetuate ill-will and distrust, but rather to use it to move towards equity, justice and a better Santa Monica. The mural has provided an incredible opportunity to reframe the conversation.

Credits

Authors

Meztli Projects Facilitation Team: Joel Garcia, Robin Garcia, Susannah Laramee Kidd and Rosten Woo

Reframe Working Circle Members

Tafari Alan, Brock Ramon Alvarado, Miguel Bravo, Lizette Hernandez, Bob Knight, Ruthann Lehrer, Kimberly Marshall, Mona Morales Recalde, Sharon Reyes, Emily Silver, Cathy Taylor, Paolo Velasco, and Zora Zajicek

Acknowledgements from City of Santa Monica

Santa Monica Arts Commission Mural Subcommittee

Public Art Committee Member Francois Bar and Arts Commissioners Michael Baroff, Kathleen Benjamin (Working Circle liaison), Janeen Jackson, Iao Katagiri and Deepa Subramanian

Santa Monica Landmarks Commission Mural Subcommittee

Commissioners Roger Genser (Working Circle liaison), Amy Green, and Dolores Sloan

Santa Monica City Council Mural Ad Hoc Committee

Councilmembers Christine Parra and Oscar de la Torre



Reframe: City Hall Mural Project Phase I is a project of the City of Santa Monica.