A giant abstract mural that has been praised by art critics but panned by legislators has been removed from the State Senate chambers.

The creator of the mural, Alden Mason, said he was notified of the removal only after the dismantling of the work began Tuesday. He called the situation "ridiculous" and said he was angry, disappointed and a little amused.

Bruce Guenther, curator of contemporary art at the Seattle Art Museum, had harsher words for the state senators who voted earlier this year to remove the work, referring to their position as one of "anti-art, subhuman mentality."

The Washington State House also wants to remove another contemporary mural - Michael Spafford's black-and-white "Twelve Labors of Hercules." The work has already been covered by a curtain, and will be removed if specialists determine it can be done without damaging the mural.
Both Mr. Mason and Mr. Spafford objected to the legislature's actions, but the state attorney general ruled the state was the legal owner of the works and could do with them what it wanted. Both artists sued and lost.

Mr. Mason's work, executed in acrylics on 16 huge canvases, was displayed in the semicircular spaces high above the Senate floor, at the front and rear of the chamber. Primarily cream and gold with red squiggles and lines, the murals are based on an Indian myth about the earth, sky and sea.

The work was commissioned in 1980 by a jury picked by the state Arts Commission. It cost $90,075 and was erected five years ago.

But some senators said the panels were out of place in the ornate, traditional marble chamber and others said the mural didn't go with the new paint selected by an interior designer.

The dismantling Tuesday took less than five hours. Workers climbed portable metal scaffolds, unscrewed brackets holding the canvases to the wall, and gingerly lowered them to the floor.

The panels, custom cut to fit the spaces, including a cutout for the Senate clock, are to be crated and placed in storage, said Assistant Attorney General Bob Jensen, who defended the state in the lawsuit. The works will not be displayed until a location is agreed upon, he said.

"It's gratifying to have them come down," Mr. Jensen said as he watched the workers. "It has been a controversy where there was no right or wrong. This ends the controversy, which has become almost bigger than the art itself."

The House mural, commissioned for $91,960, was on display for less than a year before members ordered it covered. Its critics said some of the scenes of a grappling Hercules were pornographic.
Mr. Mason said he wanted his mural destroyed or stored permanently. 

"I don't think there is any place else where it will work," he said. "They were made for a specific site, with funny little cutouts and shapes. They were meant to be viewed from 30 feet away."

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