Fund will fight mural removal

by Deloris Tarzan
Times art critic

Allied Arts of Seattle has established a Mural Defense Fund to mount a legal challenge to the Legislature's planned removal of murals by two major Northwest artists from the state Capitol in Olympia.

State senators voted last Friday to remove Alden Mason's semiabstract landscape murals from their chambers, and the House Executive Rules Committee moved the same week to remove Michael Spafford's "Labors of Hercules" murals from the House. Many legislators consider the murals too contemporary or obscene.

A third proposed mural project also is threatened. Although the Joint Legislative Art Committee voted unanimously last week to commission Jacob Lawrence to create mosaic murals in the Capitol rotunda, no money for that project appears in the budget proposed by the House Ways and Means Committee.

Michael Spafford's controversial "Labors of Hercules" murals were installed on the north wall of the House Chambers in 1981 and were covered over the next year.

House murals get night striptease

OLYMPIA — Earlier this year, state Rep. John O'Brien, D-Seattle, unsuccessfully tried to get a $3,000 appropriation into the House budget to finance uncovering Michael Spafford's "Labors of Hercules" murals, so that the more than 50 percent of House members who have never seen them could do so.

The murals, which the House Executive Committee voted recently to remove, were covered after a 1982 legislative breezehouse over whether the flat, unclaimed figures in the mural were obscene.

This week, an unknown artist decided to do the uncovering faster and cheaper. In the hours of last Tuesday, someone stole into the House chambers and tore the covering from one of the Spafford murals.

The covering was hastily restored before the House convened in the morning. The mural was unharmed.

Michael Croman, who heads the Washington State Arts Commission, calls it "the equivalent of a panty raid."

Allied Arts' executive board, says the group hopes to retain Portland attorney Leonard D'Alben, a specialist in art litigation, to prevent removal of the murals from the Capitol.

"We intend to generate national support for the project," Mendosa said. "I've already placed some calls back East. As long as these issues can be raised, it's a threat to all communities in the nation."

"We hoped the American Civil Liberties Union would be interested, but they're not," said Greg Kadera, Mason's gallery dealer. "He said Mason is more interested in making art than in fighting legal battles, but that "a court order to stop the removal would be significant. At the very least, we will seek to disavow the work if it is moved.""

Kadera said past conversations with Spafford and his dealers.
Arts fund set up to fight Olympia ‘legislative vandalism’

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er, Francine Seders, both of whom are out of town, indicate they would prefer to walk away from a fight over the issue.

“It’s legislative vandalism,” says art-gallery owner Linda Farr of legislators’ plans to remove the murals. “Vandals are always self-righteous. Art is an easy target. But I don’t think they understand what they’re doing. Essentially they’re destroying the art by ordering it removed.”

Some lawmakers who voted against the murals may be undergoing a change of heart.

Sen. Jim McDermott, D-Seattle, who defended Mason’s murals on the Senate floor last week, says Sen. Kent Pullen has approached him to say he has had second thoughts and feels he voted the wrong way. McDermott says the Kent Republican told him he didn’t like the murals, but believes in individual freedom and feels “it’s dumb to take them down.” Pullen has not returned phone calls to discuss his position.

Jay Gates, new director of the Seattle Art Museum, draws a parallel with murals in the state Capitol in Topeka, Kan. John Stuart Curry, a regional artist noted for his scenes of Midwestern farm life, painted murals for the Kansas Capitol in the late 1930s — scenes of a lonely expanse of Kansas prairie lands and of abolitionist John Brown flanked by Union and Confederate soldiers. “They were received with great difficulty,” Gates says, “but they are now revered as great treasures.” Many art historians regard them as the most powerful achievement of Curry’s career.

Allied Arts members say anyone who would like to help in this campaign can send a check to the Allied Arts Mural Project, 107 S. Main St., Seattle, WA 98104.