'Hercules' art spurs a test of strength

by Deloris Tarzan
Times art critic

The skirmish over murals on the legislative walls has escalated into warfare over whether the committee that chooses such art is a legally constituted body.

Yesterday, House Speaker Joe King, D-Vancouver, issued a press release to announce that the House Executive Rules Committee had voted to remove Michael Spafford's "Labors of Hercules" murals from the walls of the House chamber, "in such a way as to assure that they are safely protected from damage," and to find a suitable place for them to be displayed. Some representatives have objected to the murals since they were installed in 1981, on grounds that the silhouette figures are "obscene" and inappropriate to the Legislature.

King also announced that his committee had unanimously decided to end House participation in the Joint Legislative Arts Committee which chose the Spafford murals and Alden Mason's murals for the Senate chambers.

Two hours after the memo was issued, the arts committee — including members from the House — met to approve unanimously, without debate, the selection of Jacob Lawrence to create a pair of mosaic murals on the theme of "Debate" for lunettes in the Capitol rotunda. It also voted to ask the Ways and Means Committee for immediate action on a $342,000 appropriation for the murals in this year's budget.

"King's committee didn't have the authority to dissolve us," said Rep. John O'Brien, D-Seattle, arts committee chairman. "It's illegal. We were created by statute, and it requires a statute to dissolve..."
us. He (King) wants to kill the Jacob Lawrence mural project, and he thinks this is the way to stop it.

"King can object to our vote on the floor of the House if he wants to," O'Brien said. "I think that's where it should be settled. The Executive Rules Committee doesn't have the authority to remove murals. Any such decision must be done by resolution."

This is one battle not drawn along party lines; both King and O'Brien are Democrats.

Asked what will be the status of the Lawrence murals if it is determined that the art committee does not, in fact, constitute a legal body, O'Brien reiterated that King has no authority to dissolve the committee.

The legal question is yet to be settled. But what's certain is that statutory requirements call for appointment of arts

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