

Beta Version 2

Art for Everyone

Chemeketa Art Faculty



C. Mural Art

Humans have been painting on walls since prehistoric times. In the same way that we use monuments today, ancient civilizations used mural paintings to commemorate and glorify their accomplishments, rulers, and religious themes. For this reason, mural painting is also associated with public art, but it wasn't until the so-called Mexican Renaissance in the twentieth century that mural painting became an artistic discipline.

The contemporary mural movement has its roots in the Mexican mural movement that ran from 1920 to 1960. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 ended the Porfiriato dictatorship that had been in place for many years, but that victory resulted in violent political upheaval that shook Mexican society and culture. The Mexican school of painting was born in this context of newness and uncertainty. Led by Mexican painters David A. Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, and Jose Clemente Orozco, mural activity experienced an innovative renaissance.

At first, these painters followed European traditions of composition, using fresco and oil. Later, they began to incorporate modern materials and methods such as acrylic paint and airbrush tools, opening new approaches in art media and materials in contemporary art worldwide. Siqueiros further pushed the limits of mural art with his construction of *El Pueblo a la Universidad y la Universidad al Pueblo* (figure 10). This large-scale mosaic mural uses underlying iron structures and cement to add physical depth to the subjects' heads and arms, which actually protrude from the wall. This technique evolved into what is known as sculpt-painting.

In addition to new techniques, Mexican mural artists also introduced new subjects. Through collaborations with local institutions and governments, these artists created murals that reflected their activist view of contemporary social and cultural issues. One clear influence in their work is the writing of Karl Marx, whose ideas about workers' rights and labor unions punctuate the artists' large-scale



FIGURE 10.

David Alfaro Siqueiros, *El Pueblo a la Universidad y la Universidad al Pueblo* (*The People to the University and the University to the People*), 1952-1956. Iron and cement with glass mosaic. Rectoría de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México en Ciudad Universitaria, Mexico City, Mexico.

FIGURE 11.

Diego Rivera, *Man-Controller of the Universe* [detail], 1934. Fresco, 189 × 450 in. Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, Mexico.



FIGURE 12.
José Clemente Orozco, *Hombre de Fuego (Man of Fire)*, 1939.
Fresco, Cabañas Cultural,
Guadalajara, Jalisco, México.



work. In Rivera's *Man-Controller of the Universe*, for example, the composition of the mural draws comparison to earlier religious works in the way it includes an array of complementary scenery surrounding a central figure (figure 11). However, where a savior or saint would normally reside in traditional religious art, the central figure in Rivera's mural is a laborer at work. The glorification of the worker is an important Marxist theme.

Generally, these artists enjoyed broad freedom in their design, even though most Mexican mural projects were commissioned by government or private owners who may not have shared the artists' political inclination. This is remarkable because of the stark contrast that some of these same artists experienced when working in the United States. The freedom of design afforded to Mexican mural artists did not extend to their work in the United States. As an example, the detail image of Rivera's mural in this chapter is actually Rivera's recreation of the original mural in a Mexican cultural center. The original, *Man at the Crossroads*, was first created in the United States but was destroyed before completion.

Nelson Rockefeller commissioned Rivera's mural to coincide with the construction of Rockefeller Center in New York City in 1934. Originally intended as the central mural in a series that contrasted



FIGURE 13. Victor Arnautoff (and uncredited WPA workers including Ralph Stackpole, Bernard Zakheim, Edward Hansen Farwell Taylor, and faculty and students of the California School of Fine Arts), *City Life* (detail), 1934. Fresco, 120 × 432 in. Coit Tower, San Francisco, California.

capitalism and socialism, the mural came under public scrutiny when newspaper articles began to call the mural communist propaganda. Possibly in response, Rivera added a portrait of Vladimir Lenin (visible at the right edge of figure 11), one of the leaders of the Russian revolution. This sparked even greater controversy surrounding the mural, upsetting Rockefeller. Rivera refused to remove the image of Lenin, but offered to add a portrait of Abraham Lincoln as a form of compromise. Rockefeller, facing great pressure from the art community and the press, left the fate of the mural in the hands of his architects, who eventually ordered its destruction. Some claim that Rockefeller himself ordered the destruction, but the truth remains controversial.

Mexican mural artists also proposed a new way to combine mural art and the architecture on which it was placed. Supporters of the movement called this “Plastic Integration.” This meant that instead of a mural being subordinate to the architectural design or designed to decorate blank walls, murals were an integral part of the architectural design. One example is Orozco’s *Hombre de Fuego* (figure 12). Although the building was completed in 1829, Orozco’s 1939 mural certainly works as an integral part of the architectural structure. The mural centers on a man

either being consumed by fire or rising from its ashes. But the centerpiece is actually just part of multiple panels that line the walls and other ceiling vaults surrounding the rotunda, which ascends to over sixty feet. The entire series, often referred to as the Sistine Chapel of the Americas, references the contrasting natural elements of fire, water, earth, and air. The elements symbolize Mexico's push and pull between European and indigenous influences.

The influence of the social mural movement in Mexico spread to the United States when the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was implemented in the 1930s. The WPA program was developed after The Great Depression of 1929 to provide much needed work to the overwhelmingly unemployed population. Many construction and infrastructure projects began as a part of the WPA. As an added public benefit, the WPA was charged with producing public beautification projects alongside or as part of these large improvements.

Victor Arnautoff's *City Life* mural, for example, depicts scenes of life during the depression (figure 13). Like the Mexican mural artists, the artists who completed *City Life* several other murals in the Coit Tower WPA project in San Francisco were sympathetic to the revolutionary theories of communism and socialism. In *City Life*, these political interests were more subtle than in Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads*. One man in the middle left carries a red flag, a symbol of communism, and socialist magazines on sale at the newsstand. Contemporary viewers of this mural would have easily recognized these symbols as supportive of a Marxist political agenda.

Mural art has remained political long after its inception. During the United States Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the

FIGURE 14. Hector H. Hernandez, *Overcoming Global Warming*, 2009. Acrylic on interface fabric on wall, 1032 × 156 in. Beaverton, Oregon.



creation of murals became a way to express social demands while also providing beautification benefits to the communities in which the murals were located. Many poor neighborhoods developed a new image with the creation of large, colorful murals in parts of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago.

Judy Baca implemented a Los Angeles mural program in the 1970s that integrated the role of the artist with the community and gathered contributions from private and public funding sources to create large scale murals. Just as the Mexican mural artists influenced the work done by the WPA, Baca's Citywide Mural Program became the model of other collaborative mural programs around the country. Oregon artist Hector H. Hernandez' public mural, *Overcoming Global Warming*, was developed and created through a similar program in the Portland area and focuses on the artist's interest in social issues (figure 14). This and other murals by Hernandez form a link between today's mural artists and the Mexican mural movement through their style, technique, and inclusion of political material.

Mural art is a discipline that people from many different communities have embraced and made their own. Artists have been beautifying neighborhoods, cities, and communities with murals for nearly a century. Community mural art has spread from its roots in Mexico throughout the United States and the world, continuing to be a movement of cultural and artistic expression for the people. They help to define the identities of these communities and make them culturally vibrant and unique.

D. Public Art and the Viewer

Public art supplies us with beautiful and memorable evidence of a shared history, culture, and purpose. The fact that most public art is funded by public institutions like government underscores its collective cultural value. The places where public art exists can become like hallowed ground, and the dedication of public space to the commemoration of an idea, person, or event says a lot about the society that created that space. Public art is a clear example of this book's title — public art is quite literally art that is meant to be viewed and appreciated by everyone.