



Los Angeles, California, USA

Saving a City's Public Art



Avoiding L.A.'s traffic jams may be impossible, but the city's colorful freeway **murals** can brighten even the worst commute. Paintings that depict famous people and historical scenes cover office buildings and freeway walls all across the city. With a collection of more than 2,000 murals, Los Angeles is the unofficial mural capital of the world.

But the combination of **graffiti**, pollution, and hot sun has left many L.A. murals in terrible condition. The city, trying to stop the spread of graffiti, has painted over some of the murals completely. In the past, experts say, little attention was given to caring for public art. Artists were even expected to maintain their own works, not an easy task with cars racing by along the freeway.

Now the city is beginning a huge project to restore the city's murals. The work started in 2003. So far, 16 walls have been selected, and more may be added later.

Until about 1960, public murals in Los Angeles were rare. But in the '60s and '70s, young L.A. artists began to study early 20th-century Mexican mural painting. Soon, their murals

became a symbol of the city's cultural expression and a showcase for L.A.'s cultural **diversity**.

The most famous mural in the city is Judith Baca's "The Great Wall," a 13-foot-high (4-meter-high) painting that runs for half a mile (0.8 kilometer) in North Hollywood. The mural represents the history of **ethnic** groups in California. It took eight years to complete—400 **underprivileged** teenagers painted the designs—and is probably the longest mural in the world.

One of the murals that will be restored now is Kent Twitchell's "Seventh Street Altarpiece," which he painted for the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984. This striking work **depicts** two people facing each other on opposite sides of the freeway near downtown Los Angeles. "It was meant as a kind of gateway through which the traveler to L.A. must drive," said Twitchell. "The open hands represent peace."

Artists often call murals *the people's art*. Along a busy freeway or hidden in a quiet neighborhood, murals can reach people who would never pay money to see fine art in a museum. "Murals give a voice to the silent **majority**," said one artist.

