

## Murals: Fine, Popular, or Folk Art?

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The Mexican American mural movement in Southern California has often been viewed as folk art by anthropologists, art historians, and others. This view neglects the historical antecedents of the murals in the Mexican art tradition. However, this expressive form needs to be explained from various perspectives since social, political, and economic factors have dictated the direction taken by this movement. By a movement I mean action by a person or group of people working concertedly toward a particular goal. This action stems from dissatisfaction with popular norms or beliefs that have been universalized and that exclude a particular segment of the population.

The Mexican mural movement of Los Angeles started not solely to beautify a neglected area of the city, but to serve as a voice and a political statement for the Chicanos. The founding artists of the mural movement were immigrants or first- and second-generation U.S. citizens. Each of these groups possessed a different artistic background and training that ranged from the university trained to the self-taught artist. Of paramount importance is the fact that this particular artistic movement is distinguished from other art movements. It originated from a tradition-bound network of affective relationships between individuals or between an individual and a group, as compared to the intellectual relationships of one painting to another—whether the latter relationship be one of political or aesthetic importance, as are various

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“folk revival” movements or government inspired projects (for example, W.P.A. mural project of the 1930s).

In the Greater Los Angeles area and throughout the country, the late sixties and seventies saw a change in the number of minorities in universities, business, government employment, and media. With the Civil Rights Movement and affirmative action programs, these institutions became more accessible. The popular media was also more attentive to minority groups. In a sense, it was this focus that brought attention to the Chicano Mural Movement.

This movement progressed because of the efforts made first by the individual artists and then because of the undertakings of a community as a whole. At first, the artists were the ones who approached property owners to be allowed to paint murals on the building walls. The artists would pay for the paint and render the mural free of charge. Eventually business establishments—such as restaurants and grocery stores—found the mural an enticing medium and one which seemed to deter gang youths and others from painting their placas (insignias) on their whitewashed walls. A growing concern to put a stop to graffiti and to further beautify often worn-down and dilapidated edifices became a community affair. The muralist now began getting paid for his work, and funds for mural projects came from various sources including urban development programs, schools, art programs, and government agencies. This was the period from the late 1960s to mid-1970s.

The publicity generated by this movement also generated the “outside” observation that Mexican Americans have an innate talent in art or painting. Adversely, those Mexicans who were not artistic felt inadequate in terms of other Chicanos who did paint and in regard to others who had these expectations of them. (“Others” include teachers and those who were in a position to affect an individual’s view or perception of his/herself.) Those artists, apprentices, or students who had recently picked up the palette and brush were identified as folk artists because of the “naivelike” and

unsophisticated qualities of their paintings. This “naive” style was then considered one of the distinguishing characteristics in identifying the Chicano mural movement as folk.

For those familiar with folk or traditional artists’ work, an important point is that traditional or folk artists do not paint, draw, or manipulate their media the way they do because they cannot do it any better, or because they have just learned. It is because they choose to express themselves in the way they learned or the way they feel it should be done. Many of the traditional artists have spent all their time or, at the very least, an apprenticeship with a master artist learning to master a specific technique.

The distinguishing characteristics or terminology used to define a specific style or technique, such as “naive,” or “unsophisticated,” are criteria based on the Western European aesthetic dominance which has prevailed for so long in various parts of the world. Boas and others have shown that aesthetic preference differs from one society to another or from one region to the next (Boas 1916, p. 535; Levi-Strauss 1963, p. 245–68). This aesthetic preference functions within the realm of complex networks such as those found in large growing urban areas (i.e., Los Angeles with its diverse Mexican population). This complexity implies a diverse aesthetic; by considering social, economic, and political factors it brings up a second point.

An ethnic minority group was the motivating force behind this art movement. At the same time, the individuals involved represented different facets of their culture. To say that the Mexican artist/muralist community was a folk community implies absolute homogeneity and ignores the diverse institutions and peoples composing the Mexican culture group in the U.S. Some of the Mexican artists and their families have lived in the United States for many generations, others are recent immigrants from rural and urban areas. Some artists are self-taught, having been unable to afford or have access to any other training. On the other hand, some of the artists were taught by parents or other members of the culture

group. Still, some received training in an art school. The result is a convergence of various regional artistic traditions within one movement.

The artist/muralist in Los Angeles during the 1970s was aware of the Mexican mural tradition because artists, teachers, and Chicano Studies Programs were espousing this art tradition. The artist/muralist saw the mural as a way of asserting himself. The murals reflected a growing political consciousness and identity, much the same way as José Guadalupe Posada's broadsides of the 1900s spoke out against the elitism and corruption in the Mexican government. Posada's prints mirrored the revolution that was to be, and which was later reflected by the Mexican muralists of the 1920s through 1940s. But Mexican muralism is a tradition of twenty-six centuries (Suárez 1972). In a series of permutations, they date from as early as the Olmec culture, to the present. They have shifted from a "fine" art tradition to a "folk" art tradition, and include present urban traditions found in Mexico and the United States.

Technically, the earliest murals from the Pre-Cortesian era represented an elite art form depicting the life of the nobles, deities, and warriors. In the Bonampak, Chiapas murals, dating from the seventh century B.C., are seen the social hierarchies of the Mayan culture. The mere existence of the mural as an integral part of the architectural structure placed the artist in an important role. In this case, the mural became a fine art or an elite art form for this period.

As the mural evolved, its spacial placement reflected the transformation of this art form from one level of tradition (high, popular, or folk) to another. Once entering a different level of tradition, the mural's function changed and its content and placement mirrored the social system's vis-à-vis the artist's role in manipulating this expressive form. The mural was painted on different edifices and walls ranging from secular to sacred. Thus, the artist's role in society played an important part in determining where the mural would be placed.

From the murals rendered before the colonization of Mexico by the Spaniards, assumptions based on artifactual evidence can be drawn. The fresco technique, which consisted of painting wet plaster with various pigments, as well as other techniques, are evident. This technique was continued in the colonial period. However, during the colonial period the elite system changed and the art that flourished did so because of the Church. The majority of the murals painted during this time were rendered by indigenous artists who incorporated their own techniques with those taught to them by the friars and monks. These murals depicted the lives of the saints and other biblical characters and scenes, and were used for the evangelization of the indigenous peoples (Suárez 1972, p. 22). According to the First Mexican Council held in 1555, any mural, painting, or retablo (a religious picture used as a votive offering) had to follow the provisions established by the various ordinances and had to be inspected by the heads of the Church.

Secular murals, such as those painted in a mansion in Puebla during the late 1500s, clearly show the indigenous artists' influence. Various deities and mythological characters are depicted. Other indigenous aspects were portrayed in the chapels reserved for the Indians. These chapels were set apart from the main altar and church. The scenes painted incorporated gothic and native border designs often painted by indigenous artists (Suárez 1972, pp. 20–22). These murals or frescoes were often influenced by the European artist directly or indirectly, through the teachings of the friars and monks.

By the 1800s the fresco technique was being used by masons who incorporated various decorative motifs and images with pigments onto the facades of buildings. Raquel Tibol (1963, p. 149) writes that this technique was employed in the murals of the pulquerías or pulque bars. By now the mural, as an indigenous art form, was transformed from an elite art form to a minor art form. This became more evident as the dominant culture of Spain imposed its major art forms

and decorative motifs they brought with them from the continent. The folk artist, often the mason or sign painter, resorted to homes or such establishments as the pulque bars.

Antonio García Cubas (1904, pp. 220-23) recalls some of the paintings found in the interiors of the pulquerías. These depicted characters from popular novels and legends and some alluded to the political situation of the day. The political murals would poke fun at politicians by portraying them as animals or nonhumans and would associate the animals' characteristics to the persons or their names. Often incorporated with the images were puns or statements painted above or below the painting. Here the mural's function changed from an educational one to that of social protest not divorced from the graffiti or writings used for social protest. Perhaps the patrons of the pulque bars were most likely the same people writing on the walls.

The major art forms were those being taught by the Church and the academies instituted by the elites who had close ties with Europe. The mural was not included as an art form. Murals, as well as graffiti and Posada's broadsides, circulated among the lower classes, especially after Mexico sought and won its independence from Spain and France and fell under the control of Porfirio Díaz's corrupt dictatorship. Eventually, though, the mural became a more viable art form, but the artist/muralist was no longer the folk muralist of the pulquería, except for the few who had joined the art movement of the early 1900s.

Artists who had been trained at the academies, some who had been to Europe, and a few who were traditional folk artists, such as Xavier Guerrero, now looked within Mexico and its popular arts to strengthen the new art movement. Guerrero's fresco technique (which he in turn had learned from his father who used it for decorative purposes, including those of the pulquerías), along with other techniques, were being used by his colleagues Jean Charlot and Diego Rivera. Guerrero's murals were less monumental than the scaffold murals of his colleagues which followed. Many of these other artists brought with them their own techniques and came

from various regions of Mexico; they converged in Mexico City for the mural movement.

Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and others were greatly influenced by the European art styles they had learned in the Mexican academies and in Europe. Others, like José Clemente Orozco were basically self-taught. Nevertheless, they saw the mural as a traditional Mexican art form and vehicle for the dissemination of a positive Mexican image. The post-Revolutionary artists sought within Mexico those art forms most representative of the Mexican culture. This attempt, to reinvest with native pride the indigenous and the mestizo, the lowest members of the classes, was reinterpreted in the United States, particularly in Los Angeles, in the Mexican's struggle for equality.

The murals painted by Mexicans in Los Angeles prior to the Chicano Mural Movement were those found on the walls of bars, restaurants, and other business establishments. Up until the time of the movement, the only artist with the opportunity of painting murals was the "sign-painter" who was in a position to coax the owner, or be coaxed, into painting a mural that would take up an entire wall. Some business establishments in L.A.—such as Anna Marias Restaurant and Los Compadres Bar—contain murals inside depicting daily life, folk characters, or popular Mexican moviestars, possibly not recognizable to the younger Mexicans.

The emergent Chicano Mural Movement brought together the self-taught artist, the "sign-painter," the house painter, the mass-production painter from the billboard companies, the college art student, and the graffiti artist. Some of these people were from Los Angeles or other urban areas of the Southwest or Mexico and had previously been affected by Posada, Rivera, Orozco, Michaelangelo, Da Vinci, and urban education. Others were farm workers or immigrants from the ranchitos and other rural areas within different regions of the United States and Mexico. The artists possessed different levels of schooling. Nonetheless, those who converged in Los Angeles at this time had some things in common: They

resided within a complex metropolitan area; they saw the mural as a positive affirmation of their Mexican heritage; they had been affected by one another; and they shared a minority status.

By looking at the mural movements of both Mexico and Los Angeles, it is evident that the distinction between an inherited art form and a revived one depends on the individual artist. Credit for the existence of muralism in both areas goes to the folk or traditional artist who continued to use this medium. The folk artist/muralist interpreted what was occurring politically and socially in his own way and through his own economic means. As a mason, sign-painter, billboard artist, etc., he was part of the working class, subjected to the imposed aesthetic values or popular aesthetics of others. In any case, in order for murals to be appreciated, the road was readied by other artists and people who shared nationalistic feelings. In Mexico, it was felt after that country had been under the domination of a foreign power and a corrupt political system. In the United States, it was after the Civil Rights Movement and following affirmative action programs. In both cases, fine, popular, and folk artists joined forces to reinstitute the mural as a viable art form representative of their national pride and ethnic identity. The Mexican fine artist sought genres representative of the various facets of his native country and depicted these characters, festivals, rituals, etc. in his paintings and/or apprenticed himself to other artists who had previously painted murals. As was the case in both Mexico and Los Angeles, the folk artist/mason was often the master of this technique.

The fresco technique is believed to have originated in Europe, specifically in Italy. But this technique has antecedents in Mexico long before its colonization by the Spaniards. The folk artist, as a mason, draftsman, and muralist, pursued this form because it was easily adapted for utilitarian and/or decorative purposes. The fresco technique, which is employed with the base materials of wet plaster, could be the medium best suited for an artist unable to survive on just his paint-



ings. The artist/mason was eligible to be hired to refurbish a house or a building and/or also to decorate it later.

Other techniques—painting directly on a surface not previously treated and of painting on a canvas and then placing the canvas on the space to be covered have also been used. These are visible techniques during a resurgence of the mural tradition, and they have gained acceptance from various levels of society. The fresco technique, however, has been continuously used throughout art history.

Whichever technique was employed, the mural generically remained the same. That is, the techniques were used to paint wall-size pictures, whether they be on private homes, a pulquería, a government building, a church, or other structures. As mentioned, the mural's and muralist's status in society was reflected in the spatial placement of this art form. This also determined the type of theme the mural could have. The contents may have demonstrated style preferences of the day including dress and art styles such as baroque or gothic. The mural may have also reflected attitudes toward the various levels of society. Again, the spatial placement played an important part in determining exactly how these levels were depicted. Nevertheless, if the social control of the lower class by the dominant class was strong (whether secular, religious, or both) then, by way of ordinance or popularized aesthetic norms, the artist may have been restrained in depicting what he wanted. The function also changed according to social control.

The function of most murals depended on the muralist's objectives. The artist's relationship to his community and the community's role to society would determine the objective. The decorative, educational, catechetical, and social protest murals demonstrated institutionalized social control. The murals were painted to merely cover a wall; for ornamentation; to teach onlookers about various historical, legendary or other types of themes about their or other peoples; to convert; or to create an awareness about social ills or political protests. The patron, whether a person or an institution,

often knew what was to be painted on the wall, whether it be his own idea or one that the artist would draft beforehand. Once a muralist became well-known, his own ideas were more easily accepted than those of a lesser known artist.

As emergent outlets for social protest, the mural movement of Los Angeles and Mexico offered the artists opportunities to express themselves when each movement was young. As time passed, and the number of muralists grew, the field became more competitive. Muralism became a profitable business for some, but others had to look for work elsewhere. Only those who could compete survived as muralists for larger institutions. This was evident in Mexico; in Los Angeles it was also becoming apparent. For an insight of what occurred in Los Angeles, the experiences of two artists are presented.

## **Two Artists**

As David Botello and his partner Wayne Healy observe the mural they are painting on the Culver City Department of Motor Vehicles building, they make projections as to how long it will take to finish the mural. They have been working on it for four months and it will probably take another nine months before the work is completed. If the weather is bad, it will take longer.

Wayne and David feel that soon they will be able to work full time painting murals. Because there are so many artists working in this medium, the competition is tougher. Now they have to submit bids, along with other artists. Following the bidding, selection committees are charged with choosing the design and price bid suitable for the walls. Wayne and David's design was selected from among seventy submitted by artists whose ideas ranged from abstract sculpture in the parking lot, to wall hangings inside the building. The committee which selected Wayne and David's mural was composed of members from the Culver City community, the Department of Motor Vehicles, the building's architects, and representatives of the California Arts Council. David feels that the criteria used in judging and selecting a mural differs from

one area of the city to another. Some committee members feel that the walls should not be painted. The selection then depends on the majority vote in favor of a particular art form.

David and Wayne submitted their design idea more than half a year before they started painting. They looked at the building's architecture, measured the walls and windows, and designed the mural to work with the existing structure. At this time they determined the most suitable colors. According to David, the colors in the surrounding environment had an impact on their design. He prefers colors that compliment the vegetation and the surrounding environment. Since this is an outside wall, they used acrylic paints. Unlike enamel, these paints withstand weathering. As for content, David and Wayne decided to keep within the theme of transportation, past, present, and future. One portion of the mural depicts a futuristic space vehicle operated by a person wearing an astronaut type outfit and helmet. The helmet reflects the actual curbside and an early 1940s automobile along with a Mexican American zootsuiter looking at the mural and directly at the astronaut's helmet. The astronauts portrayed in the mural are wearing different insignia representing various nations.

The surrounding community was very important in determining the subject for the mural. Murals in Culver City are not as common as in East Los Angeles and in the Civic Center where a larger Mexican population resides. So, David felt that the mural should reflect the diverse population found here. He added that the presentation of the mural also depends on the individual artist's ego, or the message he wants to convey. If the owner of the business establishment just wants to cover up graffiti, or wants a historical message on the wall, the artist must go along with this theme. David feels that the mural is a teaching medium. But, he says, every artist is different. He discussed a mural in East Los Angeles. He remembers this mural, of a man on horseback, from when he was a child. The artist, who was also a sign painter, had left his nickname and telephone number on the wall. He says that the artist merely decorated the walls, so his intention was

different. David discussed the difference between his art and that of the Fine Arts Squad. The Squad paints city scapes without portraying people. He feels people should be included in the murals because the viewers can identify with the personalities portrayed. The particular mural they were working on included Blacks, Asians, Mexican Americans, and Anglos, reflecting the ethnic composition of the area.

After their design was accepted, David and Wayne prepared their tools and the walls. A scaffold was necessary in order to reach the high surfaces. When a surface has paint on it, the paint has to be removed. If the area is stucco, it must be sandblasted. This is an important step in the process of mural painting. If the walls are not prepared, seepage could ruin the painted surface. David gained his knowledge of wall preparation during his apprenticeship at an art gallery which he helped establish.

Once the paint has been scraped away or sandblasted, the walls are thoroughly washed and treated with a primer used to seal and prepare the wall surface before the paints are applied. The grid pattern used for reducing the wall measurements on to the drawing board is transferred to the walls. A full size sketch of the original design is rendered free hand on the wall. Portions of the original draft were often redesigned if both David and Wayne felt that they could be improved, especially if a detail did not work as well on the wall as they conceived it would.

David and Wayne are strong in different aspects of mural painting. Wayne is good with the pencil and in the mechanical construction of the mural. He is also quite good in drawing the human anatomy. Wayne, on the other hand, feels that David's specialty is color and design. They feel that each one's strength compliments the other's.

David and Wayne were childhood friends who painted a class mural together in third grade at Humphrey's Elementary School in Los Angeles. They were separated after David was transferred to catholic school. Twenty-one years later Wayne and David were reunited at an art exhibit. Wayne, an engineer, did not attend formal art classes, but he was good

at drawing. His uncles and his maternal grandfather, who were artists, influenced him. He admired his grandfather most of all. Wayne remembers one of the murals that his grandfather painted on the interior walls of a church in the Civic Center. For Wayne, it was his grandfather who inspired him to become a muralist.

After acquiring a Masters Degree in engineering in Cincinnati, Wayne returned to Los Angeles when the mural movement was underway. He associated with a community art center where other artists were working on the Ramona Gardens housing projects. He worked with some of the Mexican youth and portrayed them and himself sitting on a porch together and talking about their ancestors, the revolutionaries in Mexico.

David has been drawing since he was a child, and not until high school did he receive formal art training. He was influenced by his aunt who gave him his first box of oil paints and guided him every so often. In high school he was one of the best artists in his class. Later, after he was graduated he got a job doing paste-up art work for a newspaper advertising agency. He was later drafted into the army and there became the company artist. Once out of the army he took some art courses at a college near his home and associated with an artist whom he had known in high school and at the advertising agency. His associate wanted to paint murals in the eastside to beautify the area and promote pride in the people. First they had to convince the merchants and owners of the buildings that carried a lot of advertising. David and his friend showed their sketches to other members of the community and the business merchants.

David and his artist friend, and the artist's brother who had previous experience with a variety of art techniques, set up an art gallery. Here David and the brothers experimented with various techniques as other artists joined them. David was able to interact with other artists, some of them professional sign painters and commercial artists and art teachers. David worked with many of these artists and they learned from each other. Eventually, however, David felt a need to

work independently. It was during this time that he and Wayne reestablished their friendship. In so doing, they found that they had similar philosophies and that they could work well together. Both feel that they want to portray positive images of their Mexican antecedents and the mural is the best way to do this. David feels that it will take time before they can earn a living painting murals. Weekdays he works as a commercial artist to supplement his income. With the money from the mural they were able to employ George Yepes as an apprentice. David feels that George is a good technician. He says that an apprentice has to first learn to be open to other peoples' way of working. Once the apprentice has established a good rapport with his teachers and is willing to learn, then he can begin to "fit," and eventually become a colleague. George is beginning to "fit."

David Botello, Wayne Healy, George Yepes, and the others with whom they interact, demonstrate the various backgrounds of the artists who converged to form the mural movement of Los Angeles. This mural movement merges the folk artist and the fine artist and they have been influenced by each other. Popular themes are often used, and often decorative motifs are incorporated, but an important element in many of the murals is the personage that contributes to the Mexican's cultural history.

The Mexican muralists of Los Angeles do not distinguish themselves as fine or folk artists. They identify themselves in other ways. An artist may discuss the way in which he or she learned to draw and paint. Then he considers the various mural techniques and where he learned these. He knows the difference between a good and bad muralist, and to make this distinction he considers education, content and composition, and mode of application (method and materials). If an artist is self-taught, this is taken into account. If the artist has had a different education, the evaluation by other artists will be more critical.

In a Mexican community, gang youth and graffiti artists pass judgments on the mural. If a mural is well liked, the mural will be left alone. Some Mexican communities have

other aesthetic criteria, however, and this is why artists have learned to work together with the members of a community.

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