MURALS: REDEFINING CULTURE, RECLAIMING IDENTITY

By Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sanchez

A powerful essay on the connections among art, identity, and activism. Excerpted from the introduction to Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals, we recommend the full book which includes four essays by leading artists and scholars and 36 color images of California murals.

A truly “public” art provides society with the symbolic representation of collective beliefs as well as a continuing reaffirmation of the collective sense of self. Paintings on walls, or “murals” as they are commonly called, are perhaps the quintessential public art in this regard. Since before the cave paintings at Altamira some 15,000 years before Christ, wall paintings have served as a way of communicating collective visions within a community of people. During the Renaissance in Italy, considered by many to be the golden age of Western art, murals were regarded as the highest form in the hierarchy of painting. They served to illustrate the religious lessons of the Church, and to embody the new humanism of the period through artistic innovations like perspective and naturalistic anatomy.

After the Mexican Revolution of 1910–17, murals again served as the artistic vehicle for educating a largely illiterate populace about the ideals of the new society and the virtues and evils of the past. As part of a reevaluation of their cultural identity by Mexican Americans during the Chicano movement for civil rights and social justice that began in the mid-1960s, murals again provided an important organizing tool and a means for the reclamation of their specific cultural heritage.

The desire by people for beauty and meaning in their lives is fundamental to their identity as human beings. Some form of art, therefore, has existed in every society throughout history. Before the development of a significant private picture market in 17th-century Holland, most art was public, commissioned by royalty, clergy, or powerful citizens for the greater glory of their country, church, or city, and placed in public spaces. However, after the Industrial Revolution and the development of modern capitalism with its stress on financial rather
than social values, the art world system as we know it today, with galleries, critics, and museums, gradually developed. More and more, art became a luxury object to be enjoyed and traded like any other commodity. The breakup of the stable structures of feudal society, and the fluidity and dynamism of postindustrial society, was reflected symbolically in art by the disruption of naturalistic space and the experimentation characteristic of modernism.

When muralism emerged again as an important art movement in Mexico during the 1920s, the murals served as a way of creating a new national consciousness—a role—similar to that of the religious murals of the Renaissance although directed toward a different form of social cohesion. Unlike the murals of the Italian Renaissance, which expressed the commonly held beliefs of both rulers and masses, the Mexican murals portrayed the ideology of a worker-peasant and middle-class revolution against the former ruling class: capitalists, clergy, and foreign interests. Since that time, many have identified contemporary muralism with poor people, revolution, and communism. This association has been a major factor in changing muralism’s rank within the hierarchy of the “fine arts” from the highest to the lowest. Once the favored art of popes and potentates, murals, especially Mexican-style narrative murals, now considered a “poor people’s art,” have fallen to a level of only marginal acceptance within the art world.

During the cold-war period that followed, realistic painting became identified with totalitarian systems like that of the Soviet Union, while abstraction, especially New York-style abstract expressionism was seen as symbolizing individual freedom in avant garde art circles. By the early 1960s, only the various kinds of abstract art from the geometric to the biomorphic were even considered to really be art. Endorsed by critics and the New York museums, abstraction was promulgated abroad as the “international style” and considered to be “universal”—in much the same way as straight-haired blondes were considered to be the universal ideal of beauty. Those who differed or complained were dismissed as ignorant, uncultured, or anti-American.

The concept of a “universal” ideal of beauty was closely related to the “melting pot” theory, then taught in schools, which held that all the different immigrants, races, and national groups which composed the population of the United States could be assimilated into a single homogeneous “American” identity. This theory ignored the existence
of separate cultural enclaves within the United States, as well as blatant discrimination and racism. It also ignored the complex dialectic between isolation and assimilation and the problem of identity for people like the Mexican Americans of California, who were neither wholly “American” nor “Mexican” but a new, unique, and constantly changing composite variously called “American of Mexican descent,” “Mexican American,” Latino, or Hispanic. In the 1960s the term “Chicano,” with its populist origins, was adopted by socially conscious youth as a form of positive self-identification for Mexican Americans. Its use became a form of political statement in and of itself.¹

The Civil Rights Movement, known among Mexican Americans as the Chicano Movement or el movimiento, fought against the idea of a “universal” culture, a single ideal of beauty and order. It reexamined the common assumption that European or Western ideas represented the pinnacle of “civilization,” while everything else, from the thought of Confucius to Peruvian portrait vases, was second-rate, too exotic, or “primitive.” The emphasis placed by civil rights leaders on self-definition and cultural pride sparked a revision of standard histories to include the previously unrecognized accomplishments of women and minorities, as well as a reexamination of the standard school curriculum. Along with the demonstrations, strikes, and marches of the political movement came an explosion of cultural expression.

As was the case after the Mexican Revolution, the Civil Rights Movement inspired a revival of muralism. However, this new mural movement differed in many important ways from the Mexican one. It was not sponsored by a successful revolutionary government, but came out of the struggle by the people themselves against the status quo. Instead of well-funded projects in government buildings, these new murals were located in the barrios and ghettos of the inner cities, where oppressed people lived. They served as an inspiration for struggle, a way of reclaiming a cultural heritage, or even as a means of developing self-pride. Perhaps most significantly, these murals were not the expression of an individual vision. Artists encouraged local residents to join them in discussing the content, and often, in doing the actual painting. For the first time, techniques were developed that would allow non-artists working with a professional to design and paint their own murals. This element of community participation, the placement of murals on exterior walls in the community itself, and the philosophy of community input, that is, the right of a community to decide on what kind of art it wants, characterized the new muralism.

Cultural historian Tomás Ybarra-Frausto identifies Chicano art as a historically evolving social process informed, sustained, and directed by the community-based construction of a Chicano cultural identity. According to Ybarra-Frausto, to be Chicano/a requires the assertion of one’s self as an integral component of the Chicano community. This affli-
ation is based on the recognition of a shared living experience as Mexicans and their
descendants. In the United States, this identity is rooted economically in the Mexican-
American working class, supported generationally and extended geographically by way
of Chicano barrios. These barrios were—and continue to be—an important link in a
network basic to the exchange of cultural influences both within and between regions.
Thus, long-established communal rituals, such as those followed by the penitentes reli-
gious group, and traditional arts, such as the wooden sculptures of santos (saints) made
regionally by the santeros, provided precedents for communal and performative aspects
of Chicano art. In the 1970s these traditional art forms and practices found a new audi-
ence as barrio networking reconnected Chicanos to Chicano art.

Because Chicano artists were consciously searching to identify the images that rep-
resented their shared experience, they were continually led back to the barrio. It became
the site for finding the symbols, forms, colors, and narratives that would assist them in the redefinition of
their communities. Not interested in perpetuating the
Hollywood notion that art was primarily an avenue of
escape from reality, Chicano artists sought to use their
art to create a dialogue of demystification through
which the Chicano community could evolve toward
cultural liberation. Towards this end, murals and post-
ers became a ubiquitous element of the cultural liber-
ation—barrioscapes. According to Ybarra-Frausto, they
publicly represented the reclamation of individual
Chicano minds and hearts by acknowledging and cele-
brating their community identity through the creation
of an art of resistance.

Amalia Mesa-Bains points to the interdependence
between personal and collective experience in the
development of self-identity for both the individual
artist and the community as a whole. For those artists who came of age within the Chi-
cano Movement, the relationship each had with their community was intensified. This
was due to the fact that their
home environment, specifically
the shared day-to-day living
experience in the barrio, had
become a cultural sanctuary
from which they drew not only
material for their art, but also
the personal strength neces-
sary for leadership. These
artists transformed items of
personal and familial identity
into a public image signifying
resistance. This was especially
important for women artists
within the Chicano Movement,
for whom the struggle for lib-
eration, as part of an oppressed
national community, coalesced
with that of personal liberation
within the family.

Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino emphasizes the political significance of cultural self-
definition, exemplified in the use of the word “Chicano,” as a tool of liberation in the
Chicano Park

Many of the murals featured in this article are from Chicano Park in Barrio Logan, San Diego, California.

Chicano Park was founded on April 22, 1970 when the community of Barrio Logan and Chicano movement activists joined forces to protest the construction of a Highway Patrol station on the present site of the park. The Highway Patrol office was at the time the final insult to a community that had already been degraded by the demolition of hundreds of homes to make way for Interstate 5, the Coronado Bridge, the placement of toxic industries and junkyards, lack of community facilities, proper schools, jobs, and social or medical services.

Protesters led by the Brown Berets, community activists, artists, MEChA, and others took over the site and faced police and bulldozers for days while negotiations took place that resulted in the land being given over for a community park. In the following days and months similar actions by the same groups led to the forming of a Chicano Free Clinic, now known as the Logan Heights Family Health Center, and the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park.

The struggle for Chicano Park came to symbolize the Chicano Mexicanos’ struggle for self-determination and self-empowerment. The murals in the park painted by Chicano artists such as Victor Ochoa, Mario Torero, Yolanda Lopez, José Montoya, Sal Barajas, Juanishi Orozco, Berenice Badillo, Carmen Kalo, and many others portray the social, political, and cultural issues that form the struggle for the liberation of Chicano Mexicanos.

This brief history was prepared by the Chicano Park Steering Committee. For more detailed information about Chicano Park and the murals, visit www.calacapress.com and select Chicano Park Steering Committee.

“Varrio Si, Yonkes No!” was based upon a flyer for a community meeting to discuss the problem of the 48 Anglo-owned junkyards. Varrio is a variation of barrio, neighborhood; and yonkes refers to junkyards. Thus, Neighborhood Yes, Junkyards No! Imagery within the mural depicts the Coronado Bay Bridge and National Steel. In the foreground, residents protest with their placards, Mas Casas, Menos Yonkes, More Houses, Less Junkyards, and La Unidad Es La Fuerza, Unity is Strength. Barrio Logan was rezoned and junkyards began to move away.
struggle by the Chicano community to emerge from its condition as an “internal” colony. In the same way that Chicano identity is formed through a specific combination of Indian, Spanish, and Anglo influences, the specific Chicano mural style is a combination of cultural influences that include American pop-culture, art-world, Mexican, and barrio influences. Sánchez-Tranquilino highlights the specific role of youth participation and gang calligraphy (graffiti) in the early murals, not only in terms of the specific style that developed, but also in relation to structural factors, like the use of collective painting groups and the barrio locations where the murals were placed.

Prior to the Chicano movement, U.S. Mexicans were defined externally through a series of derogatory stereotypes, with total assimilation as the only way to break out of the situation of social marginalization. Art that integrated elements of U.S. Mexican or barrio culture was also denigrated as “folk” art and not considered seriously. The explosion of Chicano culture and murals as a result of the political movement provided new recognition and value for Chicano art, which weakened the old barriers. According to Sánchez-Tranquilino, this experience allowed artists to figuratively break through the wall that confined artists either to the barrio or to unqualified assimilation. It gave them the confidence to explore new artistic forms and a new relationship to the dominant society.

Endnote

1. Throughout this article several terms will be used to identify Americans of Mexican descent: “Mexican Americans,” “Mexicans,” and “Chicanos.” Each carries specific meanings, so they are not used interchangeably. “Mexican American” is a post-World War II development that was in regular use until the politicization of el movimiento, the Chicano civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Its use acknowledges, with pride, the Mexican heritage that was hidden by the earlier, less appropriate term, “Spanish American.” However, its construction implies a level of equality in status between the Mexican and the American which, in actuality, belies the unequal treatment of Americans of Mexican descent within United States society. U.S. Mexican is a term developed by essayist Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino to replace the term Mexican American with one that represents both more generally and clearly all Mexicans within the United States whether their families were here prior to annexation in 1848, or have been here for generations or for only two days. In other words, it represents all Mexicans living within U.S. borders, regardless of residence or citizenship status. The most basic definition of the term “Chicano” was made by journalist Ruben Salazar in 1970: “A Chicano is a Mexican American who does not have an Anglo image of himself.” It is a term of self-definition that denotes politicization.

For More Information

For more information and full color images of California murals, visit the website of the Social and Political Art Resource Center, www.sparcmurals.org.
Chicanas/Escuelas, Chicano Park, San Diego, California. (See “Murals: Redefining Culture, Reclaiming Identity” in the Culture section for information about the Chicano Park murals and people’s art.)

Laura Rodriguez, Chicano Park, San Diego, California.
Death of Farmworker, Chicano Park, San Diego, California.

Mural by artist Terry Ybanez in honor of civil rights and labor activist Emma Tenayuca, San Antonio, Texas.
“Chronicles of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement” by Emanuel Martinez, collage, 4′ x 8′. This collage was featured in the book and exhibit titled “In the Spirit of Martin: The Living Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,” created and developed by Gary Chassman of Verve Editions and organized for travel by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service in cooperation with The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. Emanuel Martinez was on the western staff of the SCLC in the 1960s and helped organize the Chicano faction of the Poor People’s Campaign. He pays homage to Martin Luther King Jr. for his work with the Chicano Peoples’ Movement.


© Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona
Judy Blackman Hall and her daughter, Toni Blackman, after attending a family member's African-styled wedding circa 1970. They are standing next to their 1968 Volkswagen Bug. (Toni Blackman is an advisor to Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching.)
Patsy (left) and Nadine Cordova share a light moment outside Nadine’s home in Vaughn, New Mexico. (See “Sisters in Arms” in the Education section for their story.)

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Yuri Kochiyama, poster from the Women of Hope Bread and Roses poster series, www.bread-and-roses.com. (See Women’s Work handout on the web for her bio.)

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Nadine Gordimer, South African novelist and short-story writer.

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