

## Murals: Heritage on the Walls

Adapted from the lesson by Ayla Tiago

### LESSON 1

**Overview:** In this lesson students investigate the rich cultural tradition of murals in the Latino community. They will read about the painters who began the Muralist movement in 1920s Mexico (David Siqueiros, Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco) and investigate Muralism's resurgence in the United States in the 1970s. Students will examine and compare the social and historical context of these two movements and produce a written response to a mural which they have researched and viewed in person.

- Objectives:** At the end of this session students will be able to:
- Outline the history of the Muralist movement in 1920s Mexico and 1970s United States
  - Contrast the two movements
  - Extract key points from a range of source material
  - Present information clearly to the group as a whole
  - Identify a specific mural to research and visit.

**Target group:** 9-Adult

**Length:** 2 hours

#### Materials and Resources:

##### Print

Rochfort, Desmond. *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros*, Chronicle Books, 1998.  
Sperling Cockcroft, Eva & Barnet-Sanchez, Holly. *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals*, University of New Mexico Press, 1993.

##### Video

*Diego Rivera - I Paint What I See* by Mary Lance. Direct Cinema Film, 1990, 58 min.  
According to the Saskatchewan Education's Evergreen Curriculum "This is the first film biography of the famed Mexican artist whose work inspired a generation of painters and whose murals led to controversies that echo those of public artists today. Featuring location filming of Rivera's enormous colorful murals, this video explores the artist's life and work, including his stormy 25-year relationship with painter Frida Kahlo and the destruction of his infamous mural in Rockefeller Center. The voice-over narration is drawn from Rivera's and Kahlo's writings and other contemporary accounts."

*OROZCO: Man of Fire*, 2006. Rick Tejada-Flores & Laurie Coyle, Paradigm Productions, 60 min. The story of Mexican muralist Jose Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), whose dramatic life, iconoclastic personality and dynamic painting changed the way we see art and politics.

### Web

<http://diegorivera.com/index.html> – This online museum offers a wealth of information about Diego Rivera, including pictures of his work, articles he wrote and rare film footage.

<http://www.precitaeyes.org/missionhist.html> – The Precita Eyes site offers information on the history of murals in the Mission District, the predominantly Latino neighborhood in San Francisco. Precita eyes also offers mural tours.

<http://www.adanigallery.com/Siqueiros/main.html> – The Adani Gallery site offers information on the work and contribution of David Alfaro Siqueiros.

<http://www.sfmission.com/21murals/index.htm> – This site contains an article on the Mission District's 21st Street murals with a lot of pictures and the story behind each featured work.

[http://www.mexconnect.com/mex\\_/history/jtuck/jtorozco.html](http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/history/jtuck/jtorozco.html) – Information on the life and work of Jose Clemente Orozco

[http://www.mexconnect.com/mex\\_/travel/tonysarticles/murals.html](http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/travel/tonysarticles/murals.html) – See also *Murals Come To Life In The "Florence Of Mexico* by Tony Burton, Copyright 2000

<http://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/wallofrespect/main.htm> – A virtual tour of the phases of the "Wall of Respect," the African-American mural painted in 1967 by Civil Rights activists

<http://www.maestrapeace.com/> – The website for the spectacular Women's Building mural in San Francisco

<http://www.riveramural.com/> – Information on the mural by Diego Rivera at San Francisco's City College,

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec99/rivera\\_7-15.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec99/rivera_7-15.html) – A PBS online newsletter with information about Diego Rivera.

<http://www.wpamurals.com/> – A comprehensive guide to New Deal Art during the Great Depression, including murals throughout the United States.

### Teacher's Notes:

- Visit suggested Web sites to choose relevant source material.
- Review texts, online and print, to make sure they reflect students' reading level.
- Encourage students to find additional sites to explore.

### Vocabulary

#### Mural

A painting on a wall, ceiling, or other large permanent surface

#### Fresco

Refers to a wall painting or frieze The term comes from the Italian *affresco* which derives from *fresco* ("fresh"). Frescos can be painted in two ways: *Buon fresco* paintings are done on wet plaster, while *a secco* paintings are completed on dried plaster

### **Chicano**

*Chicano* is used only of Mexican Americans, not of Mexicans living in Mexico. During the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Mexican Americans established *Chicano* as a term of ethnic pride and today it is still a term that carries strong political associations.

### **Mestizo**

Word of Spanish origin used to designate the people of mixed European and indigenous non-European ancestry. The term has traditionally been applied to those of mixed European and indigenous Amerindian ancestry.

### **Graffiti**

Words or pictures "scribbled" ("graffiti" means "scribble in Italian) on walls or other surfaces, usually public, and created without permission. The term, *Graffiti* is gaining an additional meaning as a genre of art based on stylized lettering and cartoon-like figures and objects. This art form originates in illegal public art, primarily created using spray paint and permanent markers.

### **Activities:**

- 1 Ask students to read Phillip Pasmanick's text "A Sketchy History of the Mural" at <http://www.kqed.org/ednet/school/socialstudies/calhist/sanfrancisco/mission/24thmurals.html#graffiti>

Drawing on the information about the origin of the word *mural*, the history of muralism, details of techniques and profiles of famous muralists, suggest students compile a list of mural definitions to discuss.

- Write the word *mural* on the board and ask students for their definitions to list under this heading
  - Discuss the definitions and refine them as needed.
- 2 Divide students into groups and assign reading selections from the sites listed above.
  - 3 Make two columns on the board with headings *1920s Mexico* and *1970s United States*.

With students still in groups, ask them to share their findings on the sociopolitical environment of 1920s Mexico and 1970s United States with the rest of the class. As students speak, write the salient features of each period in the appropriate column. Discuss and compare the two periods.

- 4 Ask students to write a summary (in bullet form) of the Muralist movement of each period using the information discussed.
- 5 Suggest that students research murals in their city and choose one to visit. They may prefer to visit the mural in pairs. Ask students to read about the mural and take detailed notes on the mural they visit.

### **For homework**

Ask each student to write about the mural of their choice.

They should include:

- information on the artist(s)
- the history and story behind the mural
- details of the painting itself e.g. color, composition, style, narrative features etc.
- feelings evoked by the piece
- why they chose to write about that particular work.

### **A SKETCHY HISTORY OF THE MURAL**

**by Philip Pasmanick**

The word mural comes from the Latin murus, meaning 'wall', and means a picture painted directly on a wall or ceiling. Murals may be painted on the inside or the outside of a structure. Muralism is a very old art form, and ancient paintings on rock walls can be found all over the world. One of the most famous examples of prehistoric murals is found in the caves of Altamira, located in northern Spain. Numerous figures of bison and other animals are depicted with great skill deep within a cavern, apparently as part of rituals intended to ensure a successful hunt. These paintings, which are still bright and well defined, were created by Neolithic people some 17,000 years ago.

Early civilizations in Egypt and Mesoamerica produced prolific murals, many of which are still visible today. These paintings often portray human beings and mythological creatures, and are spiritual in nature, like the Altamira images, or political, in that they serve to record and glorify the ruler who commissioned them.

In Europe, the Greeks, the Romans, and eventually the Christian cultures continued to develop the mural, and with the invention of perspective and the fresco painting technique (tempra paint applied directly to fresh plaster) took this ancient art form to new heights. The best known example of the Renaissance mural is on the ceiling of the Vatican's Sistine chapel, painted by Michaelangelo in the 1500s.

In Mexico, in the 1920s, a new tradition of Muralism began to develop. The painters David Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, and José Clemente Orozco became known as "Los Tres Grandes" (the big three) for their monumental paintings, which combined European technique with indigenous images and a progressive, indeed radical vision. By

presenting a revisionist view of Mexican history and a critical view of social problems, they sought to raise the consciousness of the Mexican public and promote their ideas for social justice.

By the 1930s “Los Tres Grandes” began to come under increasing pressure to tone down their work, and they all left Mexico for a time. Rivera ended up in San Francisco, where he painted four murals, one of which is located in the lobby of the Little Theatre at City College of San Francisco. Orozco and his colleagues influenced a generation of U.S. painters who took on major murals as part of F.D.R.'s New Deal. A fine example of this New Deal Muralism can be found inside Coit Tower.

In the 1970s a new wave of muralists, many of them Latino, began to surface in San Francisco. While some of their paintings are frankly decorative or commercial in nature, much of the work of these artists presents a definite point of view on contemporary social and political issues such as U.S. intervention in Central America, and continues the Mexican tradition of glorifying the indigenous cultures of the Americas, past and present. The positive values and diverse strengths of our multicultural communities are another common theme. The Mission District boasts scores of murals that illustrate the range and power of this most public and venerable of visual art forms.

## **MAJOR MURALS OF 24TH STREET**

**by David Escobar**

On the corner of South Van Ness on top of a mechanic's shop is a huge mural that shows men and women performing in Carnival. Carnival comes from the Latin language and means "put away the meat" referring to the sacrifices people take on during the 40 days of Lent. Many Catholic countries have long held rowdy carnivals as a sort of last fling before the privations of Lent. (New Orleans' Mardi Gras is a familiar example from the United States.) This mural tells us that Carnival in San Francisco is colorful, loud, and joyous. Most of the people shown are performers that come out on parade every year in the Mission District wearing colorful and very fancy costumes. Well-known businesses that contribute to the Mission District's cultural development are depicted and can be seen lower down on 24th Street. The conga drums represent the rich African influences that give Carnival in the Americas its special flavor. This mural, called Golden Dream of the Mission, was painted in the photorealist style; the artist projected photographic images on the wall and traced the lines to accomplish the impressive effect.

The mural located at 24th St. and Treat St. shows many animal cartoon characters playing instruments. The rabbit with sunglasses is playing two yellow conga drums. The mouse with glasses is playing a rhythm instrument called maracas. There is also a cat holding balloons, and a white rabbit playing a snare drum, a spotted dog playing the bass, a bird playing the accordion and a wolf playing the guitar. The background of the

mural shows the blue of San Francisco Bay, the Golden Gate Bridge and green hills across the bay. There is a colorful helium balloon on the left side and a red plane flying at the top of the mural with a banner with a message. The message is in Spanish and it says "Friends don't let friends drink and drive."

The mural on St. Peter's Church, on the corner of 24th and Florida is a very beautiful and special mural. It is called 500 Years of Resistance. If you have time for only one mural, this is the one to study. The mural took approximately eleven months to paint and was finished in October 1993. The Salvadoran muralist, Isa'as Mata, uses many images to express certain ideas. On the left hand side you see persons lying on their backs underground. The top scene shows a tropical countryside in Latin America. The idea here is the cycle of life. Everything that lives and dies is special. The dead help the soil to give life to plants. The dead also gives us hope for peace and are an example for us to struggle for justice.

Next, the boy blowing through a conch shell signifies music. The mask uplifts us to a higher level. The hands with broken chains signify equality. As we continue to move on we see Spanish colonial soldiers transforming into modern soldiers with guns and gas masks. The people at the bottom are campesinos, peasant people along with students, teachers and elderly people. These people resist the soldiers, colonial and neocolonial, as they march. Next to the people a colibr' or hummingbird is painted. This hummingbird is originally drawn on the Nazca plain in the country of Peru. The bird represents fertility to native peoples.

The top of the mural shows a Central American native crucified on a cross. The meaning here is the story of the Mestizo. A Mestizo is a person who is part indigenous and part European. Mestizos may have African blood as well. The machete he is holding stands for the different ways the knife is used. It is used for the kitchen, work, and for war. Native Americans have tried to resist the European culture from taking over their own ways of living.

To the left on the very top of the mural we see an open book with writing on it, a fist holding fire and a monumental stone Olmec head. There are also indigenous women and corn plants at the edges. The book contains writings from the European Bible and the Mayan book called the Popul Vuh. These religious books are influential in Mesoamerica to the present day. The buffalo, a breed of animal now almost extinct, played a vital part in northern Native American life.

Around the corner on Florida Street, the top of the mural shows us different famous persons from history:

\* Kateri Tekawitha helped northern native tribes unite and make peace with Canadian native tribes.

\* Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish priest, spoke out against the injustices that were being committed against the Indians during the invasion of the Americas by the Spanish.

\* Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz, a Mexican literary genius of the late 17th century, argued for women's rights. Her mystical poetry was very influential among later generations of Latin American writers.

\* Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador, spoke out against his government because of the injustices being done against the poor. He was assassinated in church.

\* Miguel Hidalgo was a great leader in the Mexican independence movement. He inspired many Native Americans to stand up and fight the injustices from the Spanish government.

\* Martin Luther King was the great African American civil rights leader who struggled for equal rights for African-American not only in the United States but in Latin America too. Like Hidalgo, Romero, and so many other religious leaders in the Americas, he was killed for his efforts on behalf of justice.

The bottom of the mural shows us children with flowers and candles in their hands. This signifies the peace children can bring to the adult world. The wheel which the people are turning is the wheel of humanity, progress and work. Work is what dignifies human beings. The lower left corner of the scene shows people striking with the late Chicano labor leader César Chávez leading that protest. The protesters are mothers, fathers, priests, farmers, students, teachers and young people trying to be heard in order to make change, stop war and find peace! As in many murals real people from the community are pictured.

Across 24th another large mural shows a woman making tortillas. Corn tortillas are usually made by hand. Women mix the dough with water and mold it into a flat, round shape. It is then placed on a flat grill or hot plate and cooked. Corn is an integral part of many American cultures. Native peoples domesticated corn from wild grasses and have relied on it for food and as a spiritual symbol. Corn images are seen in many of the Mission's murals.

On top of the Panaderia Dominguez at 24th and Alabama we see scenes from the ancient love tale of Princess Mixtli and Popoca. Next to the pictures we also see the famous Aztec Sun Stone or "Calendar", today a symbol of pride in the advanced indigenous cultures of the Americas. The story of Princess Mixtli and Popoca goes like this. Once long ago lived a princess named Mixtli. A mean and cruel man named Axooco wanted to marry her. But Mixtli was in love with a humble man named Popoca. Popoca had gone off to war, to become an eagle warrior. He came back to fight Axooco in order to

marry Mixtli. Mixtli had thought that Popoca would not return alive, so she killed herself with poison. She thought their love would not be possible. But Popoca came back as an eagle warrior. Popoca saw his love lying dead, took her body in his arms, and traveled to the great mountain. Thinking that the snow would awaken her from her sleep, Popoca left her there. With the passing of time Mixtli was covered with snow making her into the volcano called Iztaccihuali, "the sleeping woman."

24th and Alabama contains various smaller murals. One of which is the picture of Quautemoc (or Cautemoc). Quautemoc was the last Aztec king to fight against the Spanish conquistadores. The translation of his name is "the eagle that descends." We see the eagle descending or flying down in the background. His shield also depicts the eagle in motion.

Across the street on top of the Taqueria Farolito, we see a picture of the patron saint of Mexico La Virgen de Guadalupe. The saint was to have appeared to Juan Diego, a humble Indian who eventually returned to the small town with a cloth full of roses. Juan Diego told the story to the parish priest but he did not believe him. He then flung his cloth open and where the roses were there remained the image of the Virgin Mary. The colors in which she appears clothed are very special colors to Native American people.

Finally, the Mini-Park between Bryant and York has many colorful murals and is a nice place to stop and rest.

## **WHAT IS GRAFFITI?**

**by David Escobar and Phil Pasmanick**

It is illegal for any person to write or draw on walls not their own, but some people have been able to get special permission from police and city officials to do so. Some of this work, legal or not, is careful, complex, and thoughtful, and many people consider good graffiti to be works of art. Other people, particularly property owners, may call them acts of vandalism and eyesores. They paint out the graffiti and call the police when they see it being applied to their walls. Have you ever found graffiti on your family's house or car? How did you feel about it? Have you ever written on a wall? What did you write, and why?

Graffiti (meaning "scribbling" in Italian) is scarcely a new phenomenon. Ancient graffiti, often humorous, has been found on walls in Egypt and Rome, for example. In our time, political messages are often painted on walls at great personal risk by forces with little access to legitimate media. Humorous bathroom graffiti is another form well known in the U.S. and in Mexico.

The most prevalent form of public graffiti is called tagging. Most tagging is done with either spray paint or permanent marker, and consists of a stylized signature, symbol or logo. Tagging can be found in every part of the city. Walls, buses and sidewalks are just some places where tagging can be found. Modern urban tagging was created mostly by young people in New York decades ago as an art form. But tagging has been around for years going back to the days of primitive people as a way to mark territory or to simply say "I was here".

"Tagging crews" are groups of youth whose main purpose is to tag the name of their group on as many places as possible. The more dangerous or exposed the place where the name of the group or name of the person is placed the better. Respect is given to the group or crew that has been able to risk the most. Some tagging crews are made up of people from different cultures or ethnic groups. Some tagging crews are made up of people from the same group.

While some taggers simply seek prestige and respect for their daring exploits and creative graphic skills, others attempt to mark out gang territory. One frequently will see lists of nicknames or numbers (often composed of a combination Roman and Arabic numerals) indicating gang affiliation. For example, XIII or 13 signifies sur, the Southern California/L.A.-based group. When these tags are crossed out, it may mean a territorial dispute between rivals encroaching on another's territory. Police believe that when such signs appear, drive-by shootings are likely to occur in the area. Another ominous graffiti is RIP, meaning "rest in peace" followed by the name of someone in the community who has died.

Graffiti, while often unwelcome, are a genuine cultural expression that cannot be overlooked when "reading the walls" of the Mission, and their content reveals some of the most disheartening facts of life in the barrio. Graffiti often deface the very murals that we recommend for study, and rather than ignore them, we urge teachers to discuss the phenomenon with their students.