

Murals: A Short (and Incomplete) History

A mural is broadly defined as a work of art executed directly on a wall or ceiling (*murus* is Latin for wall). This piece provides a brief overview of mural painting from cave painting to the current day.

Murals are one of the earliest forms of art. The Lascaux Grottoes, for example, in southern France (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), discovered in 1940, contain 600 parietal (art in caves) wall and ceiling paintings. Their age is estimated at approximately 17,000 years old.



The Egyptians painted on the walls of tombs. Queen Nefertari was the favorite wife of Ramses II. Her tomb had 5,200 square foot of paintings (some of which have been looted by tomb raiders, along with other treasures in the tomb). Part of the value of the paintings in the tomb is that they represent a well preserved and detailed source of an ancient Egyptian's journey into the afterlife, including pictures of them happy in the afterlife. The painting below depicts the Nefertari playing Senet, a board game.



Frescoes are an example of mural art. Fresco painting in Europe dates back to the Minoans on Crete as early as 2000 BC. Fresco painting reached its peak during the Italian Renaissance. One of the most famous murals in history is Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. The photo below is *The Last Judgment*, which covers the entire altar wall of the Sistine Chapel. It depicts the Second Coming of Christ and the final

judgment by God of all humanity. The fresco took four years to complete (1536-1541) and includes more than 300 figures.



During the Baroque period, the form of painting called Quadratura reached its pinnacle. Quadratura is a form of illusionistic (or trompe l'oeil) mural painting in which images of architectural features are painted onto walls or ceilings so that they seem to extend the real architecture of the room into an imaginary space beyond the confines of the actual wall or ceiling. Perhaps the best known example of Quadratura is the Apotheosis of Sant'Ignazio (1691-94) by Andrea Pozzo. The mural, which covers the entire nave of the Church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome, looks like a lofty, vaulted roof, when the ceiling is, in fact, flat. The ceiling fresco depicts Saint Ignatius Loyola and the work of the Society of Jesus.



Francisco Goya's *Pinturas Negras* (*Black Paintings*, ca. 1819-1823) were initially painted as murals. At the age of 72, Goya moved to a house outside of Madrid called Quinta del Sordo (Deaf Man's Villa). With the Napoleonic Wars, the turmoil of the Spanish government, and two near fatal illnesses, Goya had not only developed an embittered attitude toward mankind but was acutely aware of panic, terror, fear and hysteria. It is believed that these factors were key to his creation of the *Black Paintings*.

On the walls of his villa, Goya painted 14 murals reflecting his fear of insanity and his bleak view of his fellow man. The images of some are deeply disturbing, in particular, the best known of the fourteen, *Saturn Devouring His Son*. As far as art historians know, Goya did not give names to these paintings perhaps since they were not intended for public viewing; the titles have been designated by art historians. The paintings were moved to canvas beginning in 1874; they are now on display at the Prado in Madrid. The painting below is called *Two Old Men Eating Soup*.



The murals at Saint Sulpice painted by the Romantic French artist, Eugène Delacroix, completed in 1861, have been described as perhaps the most important and best known murals in all of Paris. In the Chapel of the Holy Angels, Delacroix portrayed biblical figures in two wall paintings, each more than 23 feet high, and one on the ceiling at more than 16 feet across. The paintings were cleaned and conserved in 2015, returning the murals to their original vibrant colors. The photo below is of *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*.



Mexican muralism began as a government funded form of public art, large scale wall paintings in civic buildings in the wake of the Mexican Revolution. The murals were intended to be a means of unifying a divided, largely illiterate, country with social and political messages: art for the people. The muralist movement was headed by Los Tres Grandes (The Three Great Ones), Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Siqueiros.

The painting below is *The History of Mexico* by Diego Rivera (1929-1935), found in the main stairwell of the National Palace in Mexico City. It depicts the history of Mexico from ancient times to the (then) present.



Orozco is not well known outside of Mexico, but his mural on the ceiling of the Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara has been called the "Sistine Chapel of the Americas". Called *Man of Fire* (1939). The figures in the mural are intended to represent Orozco's fellow countrymen and their suffering.



Both Rivera and Orozco were the subject of episodes of PBS' long running program, American Masters.

David Siqueiros was a hard core leftist, and his bold murals often reflect a fusion of art and his left wing (Communist) politics. He was frequently jailed for his political work during the 1920s and 1930s, but was also commissioned by the Mexican government to paint what may be his most famous mural, *Los Mitos (The Myths)*. In 1940, Siqueiros led an unsuccessful assassination attack on Leon Trotsky's house in a suburb of Mexico City, where Trotsky was living in exile. He was fervently opposed to the U.S. participation in the Vietnam War and supported the government of Fidel Castro.

The painting below is of *Los Mitos*, completed in 1922 on the wall of the National Preparatory School in Mexico City.



For an interesting video on Los Tres Grandes and their influence on the art of the Americas, see *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925-1945*. This video, uploaded by the Whitney Museum of Art, was made in conjunction with its current exhibit (now through January 31, 2021) of the same name. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsjxVSc9M08>. American painters influenced by the Los Tres Grandes include Jackson Pollock and Jacob Lawrence.

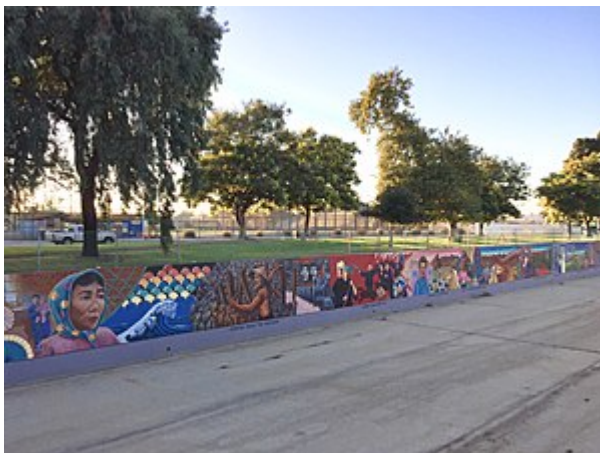
Franklin Roosevelt was, it has been said, inspired in part by Diego Rivera's 1932-1933 Detroit Industry murals to create the Federal Art Project in 1935. The project, part of the New Deal, was a relief measure designed to employ artists to create art in various media, including murals. The project, which lasted until 1943, employed some 10,000 artists, and resulted in approximately 500,000 pieces of art, including just over 2,500 murals, mostly for the embellishment of public buildings.

For example, Alfred Crimi, an Italian immigrant and experienced fresco painter, created two large murals for the Federal Art Project in the Clinton Federal Building (now occupied by the EPA) in Washington D.C. At the time (1937), the building was the headquarters of the U.S. Post Office; the two murals represent daily activities of postal workers.

The mural below is Crimi's *Transportation of Mail*.



Subsequent to the Federal Art Project, there was a shift to “community” muralism in the US. In contrast to the Federal Art Project’s mostly indoor murals, “community” murals are largely outside. The Chicano Mural Movement, influenced by Mexican muralism, was started in the 1960s to unify and educate Chicanos in various locations across the country. *The History of California* (official title), or *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, was designed by Judy Baca and was executed in 1978 with the help of 400 community youth and artists. The mural, painted directly onto concrete, is 13 feet high and extends approximately six city blocks. It tells the story of California as seen through the eyes of women and minorities from prehistory to colonialism to present day events. The picture below is a portion of the mural.



In an approximately similar time frame, the African American mural movement took shape, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement. One of the earliest examples was the *Wall of Respect* in Chicago, originally painted in 1967 by the Visual Arts Workshop of the Organization of Black American Culture. The mural represented the contributions of fourteen designers, photographers and painters, including the Chicago muralist, William Walker. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* following Walker's death in 2011 called Walker one of the "great street mural artists". African American icons such as Muhammad Ali, Harriet Tubman and Aretha Franklin were depicted in the mural, shown below. The mural was destroyed by fire in 1971.



Graffiti can be seen as a type of mural, inasmuch as it is often painted on a wall, often with spray paint. Graffiti is illegal, as it is created on spaces without permission. Thus the creators frequently use "tags" to identify their work, but still remain anonymous. Graffiti is often "word" based, rather than image based. The terms "graffiti" and "street art" are often used interchangeably, although "street art" is image-based and most often commissioned or painted with permission (i.e., the artists are not anonymous). While "graffiti" is typically aerosol based, "street art" uses multiple types of materials.

Nevertheless, there is no universally accepted distinction between "graffiti" and "street art". *Smithsonian Magazine* in a 2013 article referred to the artist Banksy as both "graffiti master" and "street artist". On the one hand, he has chosen to remain anonymous and his work has often been created without permission. On the other hand, it is image-based and he has created a number of pieces that were commissioned. One of his best known pieces is *Girl With Balloon*. This stencil-based mural was originally (2002) painted on the Waterloo Bridge in London. In 2017, it was named Britain's favorite artwork. In 2018, a 2006 framed copy of the work was auctioned at Sotheby's and fetched over one million pounds. After the gavel fell, the piece self-destructed by means of a mechanical paper shredder Banksy had built into the frame bottom. The buyer decided to go through with the purchase; the partially shredded work was retitled *Love Is in the Bin*. The original "graffiti"/"street art" is shown below.



Urban (and suburban) street art remains a major tourist draw throughout the world. Visit Florida even provides a guide to Florida's mural art. <https://www.visitflorida.com/en-us/travel-ideas/florida-murals-trail-statewide-tour.html>

And here's a guide to the top 10 cities in the world for street art.

<https://myfunkytravel.com/topten-street-art-cities.html>

And one just for the USA.

<https://uproxx.com/life/best-cities-street-art-in-us/>