

## Background

Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco helped to define a movement of mural-making centered around messages intended to change the world. In “Portrait of the Bourgeoisie”, Siqueiros shows a grim vision of the results of capitalism (painting from collaged photo images, most likely inspired by the imagery of the anti-Nazi collage artist, John Heartfield) (3, p241). After gaining fame in Mexico, the three began receiving commissions from colleges and prominent locations throughout the United States.

Diego Rivera was commissioned by the Rockefeller family to paint a large mural at Rockefeller Square in New York City. For his subject, Rivera painted a mural using a fresco technique about discovery and industry. As the mural developed, it became clear that the “hero” in a prominent section of the mural was the communist leader, Lenin. This caused major controversy (especially as the mural was in a public space), and eventually Rockefeller paid Rivera and had the mural destroyed. The mural was later repainted in the National Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico (3, p167).

**Question: Why do you think Rivera was unwilling to change his design? Do you think this was a good decision? Why or why not?**

Mexican-Americans in the early seventies were aware that they were a marginalized group, and that the terms “Hispanic” and “Latin” often used to define them attempted to tie them to the Spanish side of their heritage, but denied their indigenous heritage (the other half of their mestizo past). As a cultural label for Mexican-Americans, the label “Chicano” was created, which is thought to come from an indigenous pronunciation of “mexicano” (4).

Many Chicano artists emerged in the early-to-mid seventies and began a movement to define the culture of the Mexican-American in the United States. While American culture was sometimes seen as universally known, “for historically colonized and marginalized groups, however, Eurocentric ideology [was] so visible that it [rendered] their own realities invisible.” (4, p38) Thus, the Chicano art movement focused on defining and validating Chicano culture and history (4, p39).

As an example, artist Mario Torero painted a mural entitled, “We are not a minority” in 1978 in Los Angeles. Looking at the 1980 census, one can easily see the reason behind this claim. The number of residents declared “White” (but not of Hispanic origin) on the census for Los Angeles was 5,524,795. The number of residents specifically declared of Mexican origin was 1,908,574. While “White” citizens (obviously with many countries of heritage) were 74% of the total population of Los Angeles, “Mexican” residents (all with a single country of origin) made up 26% of the total population, and most likely were the most dense population in the city from a single country of origin (10).

**Question: Who do you think is the intended audience of this work of art? What outcome do you think the artist intended to create with this work of art? Do you think that the artist was successful in his intention?**

While defining a culture, the artists were not shy about creating their own personal artistic visions as well. Among murals painted for Victor Clothing Company were a mural of actor Anthony Quinn by Frank Romero and a mural of the 1984 Olympics by David Botello and Wayne Healy. Comparing these two murals, one can see the vast difference in artistic visions when working on such a large scale.

One mural called “The Wall that Cracked Open” is a heart-wrenching mural painted by artist Willie Herron at the location where (and painted shortly after) his brother was stabbed to death by gang members. <http://www.sparcmurals.org/preserv/HerronI.html> As part of his artistic vision, Herron chose not to paint over all the graffiti on the wall, but painted into and around the graffiti, allowing it to reside as part of his mural (7, Ch.1)(9).

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In 1976, the Los Angeles River was turned into a canal made of cement. Artist Judy Baca (who studied in the workshop of Siqueiros (2, p313)) was hired by the Army Corps of Engineers to paint a mural along the canal. More than 400 youth helped with the creation of “The Great Wall of Los Angeles”, a mural about a mile long and 13 feet high. Baca invited youth of multiple ethnicities to join with her in the painting of the mural which retold the history of Los Angeles through the perspective of different marginalized populations.(1)

[The Great Wall of Los Angeles](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjRL_AhQ3u4)  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjRL\\_AhQ3u4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjRL_AhQ3u4)

**Question: Why did Judy Baca think that history books of her time were unreliable? In what way are oral histories more reliable than textbooks? Will an oral history always be a reliable source of history? Why or why not?**

Other mural training programs have developed since that train youth to create murals, including Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, Village of the Arts and Humanities (Philadelphia), Artworks for Kids (Seattle). Many local Utah artists manage arts projects involving youth to create community-based works of art. These artists include Sarah Moyer, Roger Whiting, Ruby Chacón, Paul Jakubowski, and Kim Martinez.

1. “Backstage with Judy Baca”. Juan Devis. May 18, 2009. [http://kcet.org/local/shows/web\\_stories/2009/05/backstage-with-judy-baca.html](http://kcet.org/local/shows/web_stories/2009/05/backstage-with-judy-baca.html)
2. *The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920-1970*. Cancel, Luis R. with Jacinto Quirarte. H.N. Abrams in association with the Bronx Museum of the Arts. New York, NY. c1988
3. *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*. Hurlburt, Laurance P. 1937-1989. University of New Mexico
4. *Chicano Art*. Gaspar de Alba, Alicia, 1958-. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX. c1998.
5. *Latin American Women Artists of the United States*. Henkes, Robert. McFarland, Jefferson, NC. c1998.
6. *Wall Art: Megamurals and Supergraphics*. Merken, Stefan. Running Press, Philadelphia, PA. c1987.
7. *Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge*. Marin, Cheech with Max Benavidez, Constance Cortez, and Tere Romo. Bullfinch Press, Boston, MA. c2002.
8. *Toward's a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*. Cockcroft, Eva with John Weber and Jim Cockcroft. Dutton, New York, NY. c1977.
9. <http://www.grconnect.com/murals/html/p9101282.html>
10. <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1980cenpopv1.html#ca>

## Lesson Plan

### Objective

Students will:

- **View and analyze examples of contemporary murals**
- **Discuss the purpose and function of public art**
- **Brainstorm ideas and convert those ideas into visual symbols**
- **Design a work of public art**

### Materials Needed

Paper, pencils

Butcher Paper (one 2x4 foot piece for every four or five students)

Crayons

### Activity

Discuss the two essential questions with students:

1. *What is the purpose of public art?*
2. *What is the most reliable source to learn history?*

Present the background about the Chicano mural movement, showing the students pictures of some of the examples and using the discussion points to talk with the students about the examples. Show the students the video about the Great Wall of Los Angeles. Once the discussion is finished, return to the essential questions and see if their opinions have changed.

The teacher will create a possible scenario for a public art project. For example. "What are the problems with the culture of this school, and what solutions can be offered to correct those problems?"

Divide the students into groups of four or five. Have each group draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. On one side of the paper have the students list the problems and solutions. On the other side have them list visual symbols that can represent those problems and solutions. Model how this is done before the students begin.

Once the students have at least ten visual symbols listed, have them divide the list of symbols so every person can draw at least two. Inform them that they will be combining their sketches to create a mural design. Once the sketches are finished, the students can cut them out and paste them together to make their mural design.

Give each group a 2x4 foot piece of paper and crayons. Give them at least one class period to redo their mural design on the large paper. Inform the students that the best two designs from the class will be placed on display.

### Alternate option:

Find a local nonprofit organization that would like artwork on their walls (this may be your own school!) and have the students create the artwork using acrylic paints on plywood or ceramic tiles for that organization. This may require grant funding; a good local source is the Utah Credit Union Education Foundation: <http://www.100percentforkids.org> Please contact me, Roger Whiting at [rbwmail@yahoo.com](mailto:rbwmail@yahoo.com) for free advice about materials and processes ideal for community projects.