Murals: A historical and contemporary exploration of their use as a medium and inspiration for protest, public and personal history

Introduction
Through this unit, students will be able to explore the importance of murals and their history on a global level, specifically in Mexico and the effects and influence murals had on artists such as Diego Rivera and in Mexican politics. From the global study of murals, students will explore the mural movement on a national level and be able to identify the influence of Diego Rivera and Mexican murals in the Chicano mural movement in San Francisco. More locally, students will understand what murals mean to their communities in Brooklyn, NY and the process by which one can create a mural in Brooklyn. Finally, students will use this knowledge to create their own mural that relates to them personally and in the context of their school community.

Essential Questions:
How are murals and public art good mediums for:
1. giving voice to political expression?
2. teaching history?
3. protest?
4. developing an artistic style?
5. improving quality of life in communities?
6. crossing cultural/language/gender/economic borders?

Historical Context:

History of Murals
Murals have been a part of our history from its earliest beginnings. In Southern France, the Chauvet Cave with its depictions of animals on the cave walls is the oldest example of a mural depicting daily life. In Italy, frescoes, such as the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo, are a form of mural that can be traced back to 1650 BCE and were used as a way to educate the masses. In the Americas, pre-colonization Aztec and Mayan murals have been discovered, such as the Bonampak Mayan steles, which also depict figures and scenes of religion and daily life. These early mural forms are the inspiration behind the contemporary murals of today, and the Mexican and Chicano Mural movements.

For more information see Kleiner.

Mexican Mural Movement- Early Beginnings
As stated, Mexico’s mural history begins with the murals of its historic peoples, but in more modern history it is also intricately woven with political threads. Prior to the Mexican Revolution, Porfirio Díaz, the president at the time, was a supporter of art and of promoting a ‘Mexican’ identity that was still entrenched in the Spanish colonial and European ideals. In protest to an exhibition that was comprised solely by contemporary Spanish artists, Gerardo Murillo staged a protest by showcasing work by Mexican artists to represent a “true celebration of Mexican identity” (Jackson 27). Murillo, who referred to himself as Dr. Atl, after the Náhuatl
word for water, was later appointed president of the art academy and was a staunch proponent of Mexicanidad, Mexico’s indigenous roots and being fervently anti-colonialist. Atl travelled extensively through Europe and was inspired by the Italian frescoes that were used as social art (Jackson). At the start of the Mexican Revolution, he encouraged artists to be a part of the political uprising of the time and create truly Mexican art that was accessible to people from all classes and highlighted the indigenous population of Mexico’s past and present (Jackson).

For more information see Jackson, Lee, Rochfort, Ochoa.

**Mexican Mural Movement**

Dr. Atl’s position and ideology helped set the stage for the movement which would then influence the Chicano mural movement forty years later. After the Mexican Revolution, José Vasconcelos was appointed Minister of Education in 1914 and, like Dr. Atl, opposed Díaz’s regime and supported the development of promoting art that represented Mexicanidad and reuniting Mexico. He began a state sponsored arts program and in the 1920’s commissioned murals in order to do this. He influenced *Los Tres Grandes*, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Álvaro Siqueiros, and encouraged Rivera to go to Europe to study frescoes in order to bring the technique back to use on Mexican murals. One of the first murals that Rivera painted as commissioned by Vasconcelos was *Creation*, which shows the influence of the frescoes, as well as the Mayan steles that were used to tell stories.

For more information see: Jackson, Coerver, Rochfort, Dickerman.

**Chicano Art Movement:**

The Chicano art movement was a critical part of the larger struggle of Chicanos for “self-determination and reclamation of their community’s history and culture” (Jackson 60). The Chicano movement began in the mid-sixties and until 1975 had a focus on challenging the dominant culture and “set an alternative to mainstream art and art institutions” (Jackson 60). From 1975-1981, there was a change in how Chicano artists negotiated the dominant culture and mainstream art. Examples of important events include the United Farm Workers movement that began in 1965 with César Chávez and the high school student walkouts in East Los Angeles in 1968. In 1970, Chicano artists set out to develop the ideas set forth during National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference which established one of its goals to be cultural empowerment, and create “art that is appealing to our people and relates to our revolutionary culture” and is produced both for and with the community (Jackson 61). In the beginning of the movement, posters and prints were very popular in disseminating information and strengthening the Mexican American community and the movement. Male artists predominantly led this medium, although the mural helped in giving voice to Chicanos in the movement as well.

Similarly to the Mexican Mural Movement, the Chicano murals were to be used to tell their people’s history and create imagery that everyone could relate to within a larger society. Unlike that previous movement, however, the Chicano murals were not created by one individual artist and were not government sanctioned. They were created in communities and on their buildings with input from the community members. The murals in the Latino Mission District in San Francisco have received the most attention. *Las Mujeres Muralistas*, based in San Francisco, was comprised of Patricia Rodriguez and Graciela Carrillo, as well as Consuelo Mendez and Irene
Perez. With the community, they worked together to develop murals that “fortified the cultural identity and clarified the consciousness of the community” (Fuller 178). In addition to this, Las Mujeres Muralistas also created a “new organizational structure along gender lines and a uniquely Latina aesthetic” within the Chicano movement (Fuller 178).

For more information see Fuller, Jackson, Ochoa.

References


