Definition: mural 2 from Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary

(1916) : a mural work of art (as a painting)

mu•ral•ist \-ə-list\ n

Summary Article: Murals
from Encyclopedia of American Studies

While murals (that is, wall paintings, from the Latin murus, meaning “wall”) date from prehistoric times and have a long tradition as decorative art and political rhetoric, they emerged as a major art form in the United States during the 1930s as an expression of the community solidarity and validation of American life that marked the Depression-era and New Deal arts programs. Between 1930 and 1943 professional and amateur artists across the land created thousands of murals in post offices and other public spaces, most sponsored by various arts programs of Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration.

Taking their inspiration from the great Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, artists such as Thomas Hart Benton, Mitchell Siporin, Victor Arnautoff, and Ethel Magafan depicted Americans on the farm and in the factory, in small towns and cities, at work and at play. The “mural project” of the 1930s was part of a larger impetus compelling Americans to explore and document their heritage. Unlike their Mexican contemporaries, American muralists of the 1930s and early 1940s were seldom overtly political in theme, focusing instead on local history and the American worker.

The movement was in part a reaction against the modernist work that dominated the elite cultural community of the 1920s. Thomas Hart Benton's 1930 America Today murals in the New School for Social Research in New York City depicted Midwestern and East Coast scenes of agricultural and industrial enterprise. Benton's work glorifies the ordinary American and the American project of expansion; his masterpiece, The Social History of the State of Missouri, in the state capitol at Jefferson City, combines the history of the state with such folk legends as Jesse James and Huckleberry Finn.

In 1933 the Roosevelt administration inaugurated the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), the first of several New Deal programs that supported murals. One of the program's earliest triumphs was the series of murals painted in San Francisco's Coit Tower. Anchored by vignettes such as Victor Arnautoff’s City Life, which creates a lively street scene replete with a pickpocket and a newsstand carrying the communist Daily Worker, the work captivated San Franciscans of the period and remains popular today.

Some of the murals, such as Mitchell Siporin's The Fusion of Agriculture and Industry in Decatur, Illinois, celebrated generic ideals of American life. Many others in post offices across the country drew on local history and life for themes. Thus, Xavier Gonzalez's Drilling for Oil was appropriate for Kilgore, Texas, and Gerald Foster's Revolutionary Engagement at Bridge in Milburn, 1780 reminded residents of their heritage in creating the nation.

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With the collapse of the federal arts programs in the 1940s, the country turned its attention to postwar rebuilding and consumerism. During the 1950s the art establishment was dominated by abstract expressionism, and, without large-scale support, few murals were created in that decade.

The mural movement in the United States was reborn in the 1960s as an expression of ethnic pride and as part of the broader challenge to inequality and the values of bourgeois culture. This renaissance is usually dated from 1967, when Bill Walker, an African American artist, organized neighbors to create a collage on the wall of a semi-abandoned building on the south side of Chicago. The Wall of Respect, as it was known, consisted of vignettes of black life and heroes, amplified by print materials and photographs.

The idea caught on, and artists in Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and New York City launched a new mural cycle that took art out of the gallery or museum and into the street. In contrast to murals of the 1930s, which stressed homogeneity in American life and values, the new murals often depicted cultural diversity and conflict.

The contemporary mural movement has broadened to incorporate other goals and other aesthetic traditions. Murals funded through jobs programs, as well as through the National Endowment for the Arts, have served the needs of city planners to promote urban beautification and renewal, provide summer jobs for youth, and discourage graffiti. Many murals today are sponsored by corporations or local businesses, and some border on advertisement. Socially conscious and representational murals have been joined by decorative art, postmodern designs, and even graffiti motifs.

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Graffiti murals painted on walls near School Number 15, Paterson, New Jersey, as part of city-approved demonstration by graffiti artists. 1994. Martha Cooper, photographer. Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.


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