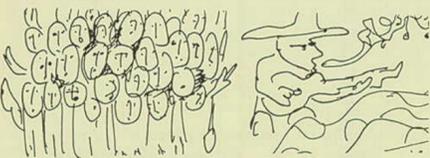


Sonoran Heritage

Mexican American Mural Art

THE POWER OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Murals are a perfect combination of art, history and sociology. They are beautiful, and at the same time usually make strong political statements about a people's heritage or sense of unity. This form of two-dimensional visual expression began with paintings on cave walls. In a few marks left by our ancestors we are able to perceive entire cultures. If there is one technical quality that distinguishes mural painting from easel art it is size. The challenge to the muralist is to solve visual problems presented by a large space. But the spaces vary, as do the materials themselves. A mural might cover the side of a building, hang on a movable panel as a paint "tapestry," or be applied to immense stretches of paper or canvas. It can be painted in fresco, on the surface of wood, or be set in tile.



In this century, Jose Clemente, Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Siqueiros brought murals, a major art form in Mexico, to the attention of the rest of the world. But the love of murals is Pre-Columbian in origin; it has continued to thrive in modern Mexico and now in the Hispanic Southwest. A link to the great muralist tradition was made in Tucson in the mid-1970s, when Antonio Pazos Jimenez arrived from Hermosillo, Sonora.

EL RIO NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER 1390 W. Speedway Antonio Pazos and David Tineo

The largest mural at El Rio Center is a collage of symbols of ancient Mexico and a tribute to the birth of the Center which began not with paperwork, but with a strong social movement. This is a depiction of the struggle of the El Rio Coalition in 1970 and 1971 when the westside residents pressured the City of Tucson for a neighborhood center with social services, educational services, and a library. At the core of the issue was the presence of a golf course for affluent non-residents when the neighborhood did not have any parks for its own people. There were marches, picket lines, demonstrations and meetings with city officials who tried to wait out the rage and resist the demands. The barrio residents never gave up, and finally the City Council agreed to the center and a park. El Rio Center opened on September 16—Mexican Independence Day—in 1972. To barrio residents, that year-long struggle marked a turning point. They would no longer accept token services but would demand equal treatment. Since then they have organized and nourished the Manzo Area Council, pressed an equal education lawsuit against the Tucson Unified School District, insisted upon a police citizens review board, and have resolved to continue dealing with issues that affect the lives and futures of minority groups in Tucson.

Chicanos have few Rockefellers and Gettys, but much of the development and growth of the Southwest has been on the shoulders of Chicano labor. The kneeling figures forming the foundation for another mural represent the recent past. Here is the power of the mines, the ranches, the farms and the railroads. Above the figures is a modern skyline and a family, symbols of the present. Behind is the serpent—the ancient past—very important and continuous. It is in the legend of Mexico City's founding and on the Mexican flag. Extending from the past is a hand offering a book to the modern family, for education is the key to the future. Perhaps the book also contains the history of a people, something which cannot be left behind. This mural speaks of a community of laborers now striving for a full role in U.S. life, yet determined to maintain its own culture and heritage.

In today's Chicano families, often the parents had little education because of the social and economic conditions of their time. Their greatest dream is for their children to be educated and successful. The El Rio mural showing an Aztec warrior guarding a modern child is a symbol of the Mexican past encouraging the Chicano future. Mexican/Chicano history is linked and continuous. While the child must strive to compete in the modern world, it need not lose its cultural identity. Some Chicanos wonder if the Mexicanos of the recent past didn't subconsciously make a choice when, instead of "melting," they withdrew into their own culture, among their own people where, if they were economically poor, they were at least rich in spirit, vitality and pride. Young people today see and revere this power of their parents in what they preserved and passed on to us.

Located in front of a water fountain at El Rio is Tlaloc, the ancient god of rain and water, necessary to sustain life and to make things blossom and grow. To the Chicanos who participated in the struggle to open El Rio, the Center is a symbol of blossoming; it took government offices and programs in downtown Tucson and transplanted them in the barrio where they could still function, but now in a bi-lingual, bi-cultural setting. This marked a new era of self-determination and a new way of thinking and living. To no one's surprise, the day the mural was completed it rained in Tucson, as it had in Mexico the day a huge statue of Tlaloc was transported to Mexico City from the site where it was rediscovered. Tlaloc has caused blossomings throughout the Southwest—of pride and confidence—and some of the most distinctive and colorful of Tlaloc's manifestations are the beautiful murals of the region.

David Tineo's work is greatly influenced by Pazos, his "teacher," but because David grew up in the United States, not Mexico, his images reflect the modern Chicano's experience. His mural facing Speedway is of a young man and woman climbing a mountain. Nothing will stop them, because they are strong. A hand reaches towards them from the sky. Such portrayals of strength are important to Tineo. He wishes to destroy the worn out stereotype, the Mexican sleeping under his sombrero.

EL PUEBLO NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER 101 W. Irvington Road David Tineo, Danny Garza, Cynthia Reyes and Darlene Marcos

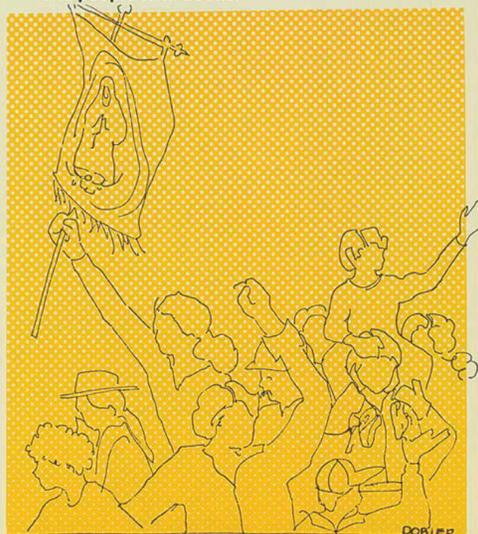
At El Pueblo, Tineo used native colors to depict the strength of the culture. On the building to the east of the complex he has painted a head with three faces representing the Mexican race. To the left is Native American; to the right is Spaniard; the middle face is Mestizo, the two combined in a new race, barely 450 years old. The Mestizo is offering a man and woman some modern battle weapons—pencils and pens. On another building, actors mingle with warriors. Side by side at the left are the Aztec soldier, the Mexican revolutionary and the bato (street kid), each in his time the front-line battler in conflicts between opposing cultures. On the right there are women representing the arts. Tineo stresses the fact that the Chicana's influence is felt, and theater and music and painting are often forms of their expression. At the center, the hand with the flame, the past and the present, depict the birth of hopes and dreams.

It is fitting that El Pueblo also commissioned two women to paint a mural on one of the buildings. On the west side we see panoramas of 19th century southwestern life. The broad and gaudy desert seems undisturbed, except for a woman harvesting cactus. At the left we see women carrying their triangular, stick burden baskets. Other ancient symbols remind us of Native American cultures—eagles, ceremonial objects, the sun.

EDWARD L. LINDSEY LEARNING CENTER 1602 S. 3rd Avenue Roberto Borboa

Here a man points toward a coiled serpent which is face-to-face with a snarling, collared dog. The man stands behind the serpent as if he is there to urge it on against the threatening animal. He speaks in Pre-Columbian language. He and the serpent, a symbol of ancient Mexico, are united against the dog, a symbol of modern life. The mural expresses the idea that the people who go to classes at the learning center will face society with knowledge and pride in their own heritage and history.

The mural is titled "Education." It continues inside the courtyard of this building which is named for the founder of the Adult Education program in Pima County. Many of the images are from the artist's own culture, but the theme—the struggle to obtain knowledge—represents Tucson's Koreans, Japanese, Laotian and Vietnamese peoples as well. Many newcomers to Tucson devote as many as twelve morning hours or eight evening hours—or both—each week to learning English, and go on to get Adult Basic Education and take high school equivalency exams (GEDs). They do this while caring for their families and holding down jobs. On these walls the curved serpent winds its way through everyday life: "authority" wearing a watch; the praying Virgin; a pregnant woman; a musician; a bird singing; a dog howling at the moon; a man with two faces; and people with books.



MANZO AREA COUNCIL 7110 S. 12th Avenue Caroline Dobler

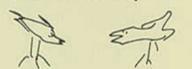
The murals of Manzo Area Council, in contrast to the controversy surrounding this social service agency, are peaceful and joyous. Perhaps when one gets close enough to Manzo to see the murals, one sees Manzo as the poor do. In the large mural a procession carries a cross and a Virgen de Guadalupe, the saint of Mexico. It is not an occasion for suffering or mourning, but rather joy and elation. The people are united and confident.

The smaller round murals present some of the ideals of the Council: a peaceful village beside a river ("The profit of the earth is for all," Eccl. 5:9); a father, mother and child, embracing and whole ("Love one another," John 13:34); and arms of different colors, clasped in unity and strength ("None of us liveth to himself," Romans 14:7).

On another wall these themes are repeated against a broad background showing the city, the mines and the agricultural fields. The images and words speak of power through work—work of professionals, laborers, housewives. Here all work is honored and respected, and in work men and women unite their strengths.

PERFECTION PLUMBING 950 S. Park Antonio Pazos

This mural, probably the first Chicano mural on a commercial building in Tucson, is a mixture of contemporary scenes and activities. In their alienation from the modern Anglo world, many young Chicanos have created a world of their own. We see them here with their elaborately-decorated and customized low-rider cars. Their costumes, cocky walks and special lingo seem strange to outsiders, but give them identity and a sense of camaraderie. Images of the past are mixed with those of today. Values are in conflict or related: Aztec dancers, warriors and temples; the cars and the street; the Virgen de Guadalupe; guns; graffiti; a priest performing a marriage; the Church; Revolutionary soldiers; a heart.



OTHER MURALS

One of the first representations of mural art in Tucson was Roberto Borboa's painting on a wall at the Carrillo School pool. It was completed as part of a renovation launched by a united neighborhood in 1977. It has since been vandalized and removed. In 1979, Una Noche Plateada commissioned Borboa to do a mural for their annual fundraising ball. It has been donated to the Tucson Job Corps. Other mural art may be seen at Oury Park. Antonio Pazos, with 40–50 barrio youth, worked on an entire outside wall of a building there. It features Mexican heroes Zapata and Villa, serpents, the eagle and snake symbol, a huge and powerful female Indian figure, Cesar Chavez, activist marchers, la Virgen de Guadalupe, churches, and typical Barrio Anita scenes with teenagers and cars. At each side, on the bottom, are Aztec figures presenting the mural to the observer.

Currently, Roberto Borboa has a mural in progress at the House of Neighborly Service in South Tucson. The South Tucson City Hall has had Roberto Castillo paint a mural recently. At the New Pascua Community Center, Danny Leon and Ramon Gomez are painting murals with a Yaqui history and perspective. Their art depicts ceremonial dancers, flowers, animals, masks, musicians and the church. Wilmot Library has a paper mural in its meeting room that was done by children under the direction of Roberto Borboa, who taught a mural workshop there in 1979. It is likely more mural art will appear in both portable and permanent locations as more people are drawn to this expressive art form that speaks so urgently of past experience and personal and cultural identity.

For more information about mural art, we recommend these books which are available at the Tucson Public Library:

A History of Mexican Mural Painting, Antonio Rodriguez

Mexican American Artists, Jacinto Quirarte

Mexico: History in Art, Bradley Smith*

Mural Manual: How to Paint Murals for the Classroom, Community Center and Street Corner, Mark Rogovin

Mural Painting of Teotihuacan, Arthur Miller

Painted Walls of Mexico: From Prehistoric Times Until Today, Manuel Alvarez Bravo and Emily Edwards

Pintura Mural, Siglo XX, Ignacio Martinez*

The Mexican Muralist, Alma M. Reed

*Available in Spanish.

This brochure was prepared by Frank de la Cruz, El Rio Library, and mural artists, and the staff of Sonoran Heritage, a National Endowment for the Humanities Learning Library program at the Tucson Public Library, Tucson, Arizona, 1980.