

Art for the People

Murals provide insights into Southern California's culture and history

By Brenda Rees

Photos by Scott C. Schulman and Todd Masinter

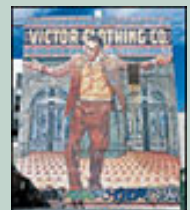
Larger-than-life portraits of people, history, and ideals, murals are a major part of our cultural landscape in Southern California. You can't miss them: They adorn buildings, alleyways, walls, and freeways and transform daily commutes into drives through an expansive art gallery.

There are thousands of murals in Southern California, so it would be impossible to choose one, or even a single region, to represent their significance. Instead, we've highlighted murals from three distinct communities — downtown Los Angeles, Lompoc, and San Diego's Chicano Park — that showcase the connections among art, culture, politics, and neighborhood pride. (Click any image below to view a larger version.)



Los Angeles invaded by bees? "*Fifty-One Bees*" (on an elevator shaft of the Southern California Flower Market at 755 S. Wall Street, in downtown L.A.) by Elizabeth Garrison and Victor Henderson alludes to both the products sold and the beehive activity in the market.

"*The Pope of Broadway*" (on Broadway between 2nd and 3rd Streets, in downtown L.A.) by Eloy Torrez portrays actor Anthony Quinn, who grew up in East L.A. The Victor Clothing Company commissioned this mural to show appreciation to the community.



"*Tragedy at Honda Point*" (South G Street, Lompoc) by Kabu re-creates one of the greatest naval peacetime disasters in U. S. history. Seven destroyers sank off the rocky coast near Lompoc in 1923, killing 23 sailors.

"Chicano Park Takeover" (Chicano Park, San Diego) by Tomas Casteneda and Roger Lucero includes an image of a Tarahumara Indian runner carrying a torch, referring to an event held in San Diego's Barrio Logan each December.



Downtown Los Angeles

In the hands of artists, downtown L.A.'s towering buildings and sprawling freeway walls have become giant easels, and murals are everywhere you look. Much of L.A.'s early mural scene grew out of a Mexican influence, says Robin Dunitz, author of *Street Gallery: Guide to Over 1,000 Los Angeles Murals*. Revolutionary Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros came to California in the 1930s and created grand panoramas that often depicted radical themes. The art form caught on, and over the years a variety of influences, including the Public Works of Art Project in the 1930s and early '40s, the political and social struggles of the '60s and '70s, and major events such as the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, contributed to the spread of murals.

These artworks have seeped into the public consciousness, shaping downtown L.A. and beyond with color, context, comfort, and sometimes controversy. "Seeing really cool images that exist where you don't expect them is a wonderful experience," says Bill Lasarow, president of the Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles. "Murals enliven a community with a bolt of energy and quality that didn't exist before." (Click any image below to view a larger version.)



At 35,000 square feet, "Dusk" (South Olive Street between 4th and 5th Streets, best seen from inside the Gas Company Tower Building) by Frank Stella is the largest mural in downtown L.A.

"Going to the Olympics" (101 Freeway North between Alameda and San Pedro Streets) by Frank Romero was created for the 1984 Summer Olympic Games.



For mural locations, as well as artist biographies, visit the Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles's website at www.lamurals.org.

Lompoc

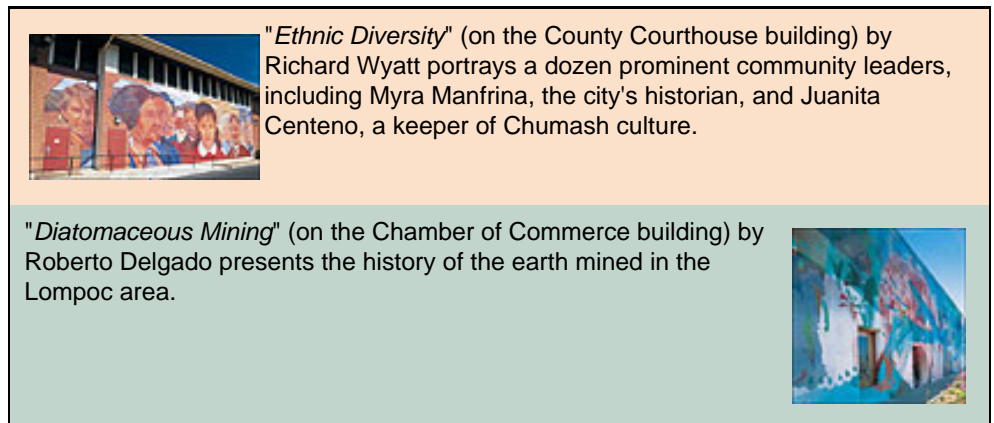
In 1987, hoping to rescue his town from a sagging economy, Gene Stevens, who was then a city council member, looked to Chemainus, a small community in British Columbia. "The townspeople there commissioned world-class artists to paint murals to attract tourists, and it was working," says Stevens, who is also a former mayor of Lompoc. "We thought, Why not here?"

Indeed, why not Lompoc, with its rich agricultural and mining history and close ties to Vandenberg Air Force Base and La Purisima mission. This seemingly sleepy town,

known for its flower-seed farming, had many stories to tell. (Click any image below to view a larger version.)

Today, murals permeate Lompoc. Artists from around the world have created more than 60 artworks for the Lompoc Mural Project, and the city organizes an annual "Mural in a Day" event where master muralists, assisted by other artists, create a full-fledged mural. Lompoc is also home to "Art Alley," an outdoor gallery that showcases 25 works at a time.

It's unclear just how big a role murals have played in revitalizing Lompoc, Stevens says, but overall they've made the citizens proud of their history and culture. "These murals have become so much a part of our lives," he says. "We can't imagine our city without them."



"*Ethnic Diversity*" (on the County Courthouse building) by Richard Wyatt portrays a dozen prominent community leaders, including Myra Manfrina, the city's historian, and Juanita Centeno, a keeper of Chumash culture.

"*Diatomaceous Mining*" (on the Chamber of Commerce building) by Roberto Delgado presents the history of the earth mined in the Lompoc area.

A walking-tour brochure is available from the Lompoc Valley Chamber of Commerce and Visitor's Bureau; (805) 736-4567 or (800) 240-0999. For more information, visit the Chamber of Commerce's website at <http://store.yahoo.com/lompoc/murals.html>.

Chicano Park, San Diego



The world's largest collection of Chicano outdoor murals exists in this park in San Diego's Barrio Logan. More than 100 images, as well as stanzas of poetry in both Spanish and English, are painted on giant freeway pylons, some as high as 40 feet above the ground.

The park itself represents the community's struggle. In 1963, freeway construction (and later a bridge) split the community, abruptly dividing and displacing neighbors. The final straw came in 1970, when citizens found out that an area they had been promised for park space would become the site of a CHP substation. "The neighborhood rallied around the site and stopped the construction," says Kathleen Robles, professor of cultural anthropology at San Diego City College and director of the Chicano Park Historical Documentation Project. (Click any image below to view a larger version.)

Residents had envisioned a place for children to play, a gathering area for celebrations, a space for artistic expression. After numerous negotiations, the city allowed muralists to breathe life into the park's concrete structures, and by 1973 bright colors filled Chicano Park. In 1980, the park was designated an official historical site.

Today, a steering committee approves upcoming murals, and many artists work with

children's groups to create them. "We have to educate our children about what the neighborhood had to go through to get this park," Robles says. "We should never forget."

	<p>"Chicano Park Takeover" by Tomas Casteneda and Roger Lucero depicts the citizens' physical takeover of the land on April 22, 1970.</p>
<p>"Coatlicue" by Susan Yamagata and Michael Schnorr shows the Aztec Goddess of the Earth giving birth to a water god. The mural was vandalized just two months after its creation, and Schnorr transformed three of the damaged areas into threatening dragons.</p>	
	

Chicano Park is located at Logan Avenue and Cesar E. Chavez Parkway in San Diego. For more information and a virtual tour, visit <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/dept/mas/chicano>.

The Art of the Matter



Southern California's murals face the daily threats of sunlight, pollution, earthquakes, and vandalism. Because public funding for mural restoration can be uncertain, the cost of repair often comes from private donations, volunteer preservation groups, or the artists themselves.

Recently, artists and preservationists in Los Angeles have been buzzing about a \$1.7-million restoration project to be funded by the state and the city. Participants would include a handful of private organizations, and the project hopes to restore as many as 40 freeway murals, including works by renowned muralist Kent Twitchell (above, photographed earlier this year while restoring his 1971 mural "Strother Martin Monument," located on Fountain Avenue at Kingsley Drive in Hollywood). (Click the image below to view a larger version.)



"Street of Eternity/Calle de Eternidad" (351 S. Broadway, downtown L. A.) by Johanna Poethig features giant arms reaching upward. The artist was drawn to the surrounding Latino community, and her design was inspired by pre-Columbian symbols and artifacts.

Brenda Rees is a freelance writer who lives in Eagle Rock.