New Deal-Era Murals in San Francisco: Historic Murals and Contemporary Legacies

Standards Addressed

Visual Arts – Grades K – 12: Aesthetic valuing, Creative Expression, Connections, Relationships and Applications
US History and Geography – Grade 11: Continuity and Change in the Twentieth Century

Content Overview

The Bay Area boasts a rich mural tradition that includes several projects commissioned in the 1930s and 1940s. This episode of *Let’s Get Lost* takes a look at some of San Francisco’s internationally renowned New Deal-era murals.

The Works Progress Administration was part of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, a series of initiatives launched between 1933 and 1938, intended to aid American economic revival during the Great Depression. Originally called the Civil Works Administration, the program was originally focused on short-term recovery, and providing jobs for the unemployed. The WPA functioned alongside the Public Works Administration, which was aimed at major federal building projects. Often funding was pooled from both sources to build larger projects. Over the course of the Great Depression, the WPA and the PWA employed over eight and a half million Americans, reformed the financial system, and helped America pull through the Depression until it came to a definitive end with the outbreak of the Second World War.

Roosevelt and WPA administrator Harry Hopkins saw the project as more than simply economic relief, but as a means to boost morale nationally. Rather than distributing money to those in need, Roosevelt sought to create jobs that would result in projects that would benefit the country as a whole. Hopkins regarded artists of all fields as worthwhile workers, and employed them in the service of creating works designed to instill pride in
national and local history. The hope was that art would no longer be a rarified commodity, but rather would belong to everyone.

The WPA era was also marked by very progressive attitudes toward equality for women and minorities in the workplace. On the eve of Roosevelt's announcement of the WPA program, Hopkins asked that the president specify that no artist would be discriminated against based on race, religion, or politics. The WPA was noted for hiring many Jewish and African-American artists, but what is perhaps even more remarkable for the time is that roughly 42% of the artists employed were women. Never before had women been so well represented in public art in the United States.

San Francisco benefitted greatly from the WPA program. Mayor Angelo Rossi had close ties to Washington, and often went to the capital to lobby for funds for his city. As a result, San Francisco has more WPA funded projects than any other city in America, with the exception of New York. The WPA was responsible for many of the city's greatest landmarks, including the Bay Bridge. San Francisco also has an impressive series of WPA murals.

The San Francisco muralists who worked for the WPA were heavily influenced by the work of the Mexican Muralistas, and Diego Rivera in particular. Rivera and Frida Khalo visited San Francisco several times in the 1930s and were treated like celebrities. Several San Francisco artists went to Mexico to study with Rivera and the other major muralists of the time: Jose Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Orozco, too, came to California, and painted a mural at Pomona College in Southern California.

While American artists were strongly encouraged to refrain from political commentary in their work, the post-revolutionary Mexican government specifically sought political pieces from their artists. Mexican public art was so intertwined with the ideals of the revolution, that American artists who studied with the Muralistas couldn't help but be influenced by them, and often made political work. The Muralistas were intent on telling the history of the Mexican people in a manner that would be accessible to the masses. The politically uncompromising murals that these artists made in the United States were often centers of controversy and targets of censorship.

The WPA ended with World War II, as the war effort definitively lifted America out of the Great Depression. Roosevelt died in 1945, and after the war, there were questions about who owned much of the art that the WPA produced. Much of it was destroyed, as it was thought to be old-fashioned in the post-war artistic climate defined by Abstract Expressionism. The destroyed works are a lost record of an influential era in America's history, but more ironically, many WPA artists whose work may have been destroyed became the triumphant leaders of American modernism, including Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston, Lee Krasner, and others.
The New Deal's PWAP, Public Works of Art Project, commissioned the murals that now adorn the interior of Coit Tower. The Tower had just been completed using funds bequeathed by Lillie Hitchcock Coit, who asked that her gift be used to beautify the city. At the time of the PWAP commission, the undecorated monument was widely held to have been a waste of public funds. The project was designed to justify the existence of the building by representing inspiring visions of California's history and industry.

The project was the result of a collaboration of twenty-six Bay Area artists. The commission was to present an optimistic vision of San Francisco and its environs as industrially and agriculturally productive. The PWAP envisioned the mural cycle as a boost to the public's morale.

While most of the Coit Tower murals did just that, several of the panels showed a harsher reality. The Depression had radicalized many American artists, who felt a responsibility to present a less varnished view of the national economic situation. Artist John Langley Howard depicted scenes that criticized the exploitation of the poor, showing a destitute family desperately panning for gold, while a rich family watches, amused. Other scenes showed angry workers reading socialist papers, a wealthy man being robbed at gunpoint, radical newspapers and Marxist book titles, and even a hammer and sickle as part of a series of symbols designed to represent the political and religious views of San Franciscans. The murals caused a great deal of controversy and threats of censorship, but in the end, only the hammer and sickle was removed.
The mural at the Mother’s House at the San Francisco Zoo was painted by two women, Dorothy Pucinelli and Dorothy Forbes, who decided to represent the theme of Noah’s Ark. The Mother’s House was originally built in dedication to the zoo founder’s mother, and was designed as a quiet place for mothers to rest with their children while visiting the facility. The murals are complemented by mosaics done by Margaret, Esther and Helen Bruton, which show St. Francis of Assisi blessing the animals and other images of human beings interacting peaceably with the animals. California and San Francisco, in particular, became famous at this period for reviving the ancient, painstaking art of mosaic. In recent years, the work at the Mother’s House has fallen into disrepair and, like several WPA art projects, is in need of restoration.
The Diego Rivera mural at City College of San Francisco is perhaps the most famous extant work of the New Deal era, attracting throngs of international visitors every year. It was originally designed for and exhibited at the 1939/1940 World’s Fair on Treasure Island, the theme of which was Pan American Unity. Visitors to the fair could see artists making their work and many came to see the famous Rivera completing the mural. The mural is a monumental ten-panel piece, the largest work Rivera ever completed, which became the centerpiece of the exhibition. Rivera envisioned a unification of the Americas through artistic endeavors that combined the industrial genius of the North with the artistic expression of the Southern indigenous cultures, which he represented in the mural through a single heroic figure, half Aztec god, half machine. After the World’s Fair, the mural was saved and installed in the new City College of San Francisco, along with several other commissions from the exhibition.
Located near the Embarcadero at 101 Spear Street near Mission, the Rincon Annex Post Office was one of the last great New Deal art projects. The original theme was to be a cycle of twenty-four murals showing California’s history. Anton Refregier, a Russian immigrant from Woodstock, New York, won the competition. He came to San Francisco and quickly familiarized himself with the history of the city and state. The Second World War broke out during the course of the project, and production was stopped on the mural, only to be completed after the war. The initial concept was to end the cycle with 1939/1940 World’s Fair on Treasure Island, but given recent events, Refreger decided to extend the series to twenty-nine panels. He ended the project with the completion of the Golden Gate Bridge, the war, and finally with the creation of the United Nations in San Francisco.

The Rincon Annex murals are unusual for a public historical depiction. Instead of a procession of gloried triumphs, it represents a series of conflicts, including assaults on Chinese laborers and the Pacific Maritime and General Strikes. The cycle ends somewhat hopefully with the formation of the United Nations, suggesting that the creation of this institution marked the end of these conflicts.

The Right attacked the cycle fiercely even as it was being completed. Refregier was threatened by gangs, which began to harass him as he worked. Fearing for his safety, the artist refrained from working after sunset. In the early 1950s, the mural was the focus of a congressional subcommittee hearing to determine if the piece was pro-Communist. San Franciscans, including curators from all the major museums in the city, defended the mural, and in the end, the trial, led in part by a young and ambitious Richard Nixon, did not succeed.
CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

The mural tradition has continued in San Francisco to this day, through the many political murals made in the 1980s and ‘90s, to the more recent outdoor projects of muralists such as Andrew Schoultz, Mona Caron, Sirron Norris, Rigo 23, Mike Shine, Barry McGee, and others.

One of the most exciting contemporary sites of mural activity in San Francisco is Balmy Alley, a lane that runs off 24th street near Harrison in the Mission District. Balmy Alley has featured ongoing and ever-changing murals by local artists since the mid-1980s.

Another important location for contemporary murals is Clarion Alley, which runs between Valencia and Mission streets, near 17th street in the Mission District. The alley has been a public performance site for artists since the early 1960s, when artists like avant-garde composer Terry Riley would perform in a warehouse that had existed there. In later October 1992, a group of local artists formed the Clarion Alley Mural Project (CAMP), which has created and facilitated ongoing mural projects that decorate the small alley. Clarion Alley also continues to host many street performances, festivals, and happenings.

As a resource, check out KQED’s educational video about local contemporary muralists, Sirron Norris and Mona Caron, who discuss their own connections with New Deal-Era muralists. http://youtu.be/Lmq2NZ4sx-A

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• Several of the WPA murals sparked controversy on both the Right and the Left due to their criticism of the status quo and unvarnished historical representations. To what degree are public art projects able to offer a critique of the society in which they are produced? How are they different from private works of art?

• How would you describe the style of the New Deal murals? By the mid-1940s, New Deal art was thought to be hopelessly old fashioned. Why was this? How do the murals appear today?

• The New Deal era marked many socially progressive changes in America, including a much greater representation of women and minorities in the workforce. What are other legacies from the 1930s? And what aspects of the era have been lost?

• Roosevelt’s New Deal marked a radical departure from the way that economic recession and poverty were dealt with in America. What ideas from the New Deal might be useful today? And what aspects of the New Deal seem historically bound to the particular conditions of the 1930s?
K-12 CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

➢ Stories From the Pan American Unity Mural (visual art activity)

If possible, visit the Pan American Unity mural at City College of San Francisco. Directions, viewing times and other information can be found at http://www.ccsf.edu/NEW/en/about-city-college/diego-rivera-mural.html. Alternatively, students can view images of the mural on many Web sites. For a list of options, do an Internet search for Pan American Unity.

Invite students to draw a minimum of three thumbnail (small) sketches that represent three different areas of the mural. Observe the three and then ask students to exclude two and pick one that they will focus on. Ask them why they chose it. Discuss the characteristics of the sketch. Who does it include? Are there any symbols or imagery used to represent the ideas?

Next, invite students to create a painting that includes the elements in the chosen sketch. Encourage them to substitute or incorporate their own symbols for their family, culture, or interests. Remind them to develop the painting from the original compositional sketch, but to add their own personal elements in terms of artistic style, characters in the painting, symbols, etc. Younger students will be successful with tempera or acrylic paints. Older and more experienced students can use acrylic paint, oil sticks, or oil paint. If students have not used oil paint before, they will need instructions on how use solvent to clean brushes and how to properly handle and dispose of paper towels used for cleaning the brushes.

When the painting process is complete, display the work in a prominent location and invite discussion. Encourage conversation about symbolic imagery, time, place and people in the artwork.

➢ Murals: A Place for Protest (visual art activity)

For centuries, murals and public art have emerged as an important means of communication in cultures and communities throughout the world. The murals created during the New Deal era served as a powerful canvas for political, cultural, and social expression and opinion.

To begin this activity, display or provide images of the Coit Tower Murals. Images can be found on several websites. A search for images can begin with an Internet search for Coit Tower Murals. Ask students to study the images and take five to ten minutes to describe the images in writing. Invite them to record their personal reactions and ideas about the images.

Invite students to share what they've written with the class. Explain to the class that the Coit Tower Murals, created by twenty-six Bay Area artists, were intended to depict the inspiring visions of California's agriculture, history, culture and beauty. The PWAP envisioned the murals improving public morale during a time of despair. Many of the murals did just that, but several images depicted a more realistic look at the political and economic climate of the time. American artists began to feel a responsibility to communicate a realistic view of the national political and economic situation, depicting scenes of unsettled workers, destitute families, and crime. The artists were using the murals as a means to communicate the injustices of the economic and political climate. Invite students to discuss the following questions:

• Can art be an effective form of protest and a means for bringing about political and social change?
• What kind of political art have you seen?
• What message was the artist trying to convey?
• What symbols and images were used?
• What effect did it have on the community or country?

Begin the art-making process by inviting students to brainstorm a list of local, national or international issues that they are aware of. Ask them to consider their sources: newspapers, television, radio, Internet, etc. Suggested topics include social issues, economic inequality, technology, politics, the environment, or war. Compile a group list and invite students to create their own piece of art with the purpose of bringing about political or social change. Students can draw from their own personal experiences, beliefs, current events or other sources.

➤ **Creating Classroom Murals** *(visual art activity)*

Invite the class to work in small groups to create classroom murals. Engage them in a discussion to share ideas for themes they could base their murals on (refer to the activity above, *Murals – A Place for Protest* to develop ideas, discussions and topics). Create a list of ideas and ask each group to choose a theme. Encourage them to think about how they will design their mural, and what types of art materials they would like to use.

Find an area in the classroom where students can work. Provide each group with a large sheet of white or brown butcher paper and art materials. Photograph the project to both document the mural process and the ways in which students worked together to complete the project. After students have completed their murals, invite them to write about the theme of their mural. Find an area of the classroom to display the murals and writings. Provide time for the students to share their experiences with the class.

➤ **Stepping Out – A Character Study** *(theatre arts activity)*

Introduce this activity by viewing and discussing Diego Rivera’s mural, *Pan American Unity*. Begin by inviting students to describe what they see in the mural, keeping in mind that the mural, 22 feet tall by 73 feet long, is dense with imagery and rich in detail. The idea behind the discussion is to allow students to form a general idea about the meaning and significance of the mural. Encourage discussion by asking open-ended questions:

• What is going on in the mural?
• What story is the mural telling?
• Who do you recognize in the mural and what are they doing?
• Why do you think Diego Rivera chose the people he did for his painting?
• How would you describe the style of painting?
• Why do you think the artist chose to paint the mural on separate panels?
• How do the individual panels relate to the whole story?
• Describe one thing you like about the painting and why?

Next, ask students to choose one character from the mural that they like or find interesting. Invite them to imagine their character walking off the painting, stepping into the classroom and sitting down next to them. What would their character say? How would they feel? Would their character be concerned with current social or political issues? Would they want to see where
you live? Would they want to meet your family? What do you think they would like to do? What would happen if they went off on their own to explore your school or community? Invite students to write a dialogue between themselves and the character. Encourage them to develop an interesting story that might include their feelings about the current political climate, the role of women, the industrial revolution, the condition of the environment, etc. With the dialogues complete, ask students to pick a partner to act out as the character. Make two copies of the dialogues and invite students to practice and eventually perform their dialogues as skits to the class. Videotape or record the performances for later viewing and discussion.

Exploring the Lives of Historical Figures (history/research activity)

Diego Rivera’s mural, *Pan America Unity*, is rich in characters, some fictitious and others historical. Historical characters include:

- Frida Kahlo – Mexican artist
- Diego Rivera himself – Mexican artist
- Charlie Chaplin – English silent film comic actor and director
- Paulette Goddard – American film actress
- Helen Crilnovich – American diving champion
- Abraham Lincoln – American president
- George Washington – American president
- Benjamin Franklin – American author, politician and scientist
- Adolf Hitler – German politician and leader of the Nazi party
- Joseph Stalin – Russian dictator
- Benito Mussolini – Italian politician and leader of the National Fascist Party

Choose a character and write a one page essay about his or her life. Include why they were significant in the mural. Invite students to read their essays to the class. Encourage discussion and invite comments around political philosophies, beliefs and the relationships between the individuals in the mural.

Free Journal Writing - Exploring Misperceptions (language arts activity)

Included in the Coit Tower Murals is John Langley Howard’s painting, *California Industrial Scenes*, representing images of striking miners marching together in solidarity, one of whom holds a copy of the controversial paper, *The Western Worker*. In another part of Howard’s mural, he paints a new hydroelectric plant alongside an angry couple and their family, dressed in shabby clothing, washing their clothes and panning for gold in the river below the dam. Above them, Howard added a group of well dressed, chauffeur driven people who look in amusement at the families’ tent and belongings. (Google Images search Coit Tower Murals John Langley Howard.) The scene criticizes the exploitation of the poor and the power of the rich. Howard draws a clear line between rich and poor.

Invite a discussion about our perceptions of wealth and poverty. What perceptions do we have of those in a different socio-economic class than ourselves? If the characters in Howard’s mural could speak, what would they say to each other? Would they come to a mutual understanding of their situations? What would their discussion look like?
Invite students to explore other misperceptions we might have about people. Do we misperceive and carry assumptions about people with disabilities or illnesses, people of different religions, people with different skin colors, people of different ethnic backgrounds, etc.?

Invite students to address this topic in a free writing journal exercise. Free writing is a timed exercise (10 to 20 minutes) where students write non-stop without making any corrections. Encourage students to write whatever comes to mind without self-censoring or judging their writing.

After the free writing exercise, invite students to share and discuss their responses, keeping in mind that journal writing can be kept private.

➢ Create a Personal Fresco (visual art activity)

The mural artists of the New Deal era created their murals using a fresco painting technique; a method of applying pigment directly into fresh and often wet plaster. Using Plaster of Paris, students will create a small and portable fresco of their own.

Materials include:

- Plaster of Paris (an 8 lb. box will make about 30 small frescos)
- Brown burlap, size 8 inch x 8 inch for each student
- Chalk pastels
- Mixing bowl
- Spatula
- Water and water spray bottle
- 1 cup measure
- Newsprint or other sketching paper
- Scrap cardboard or poster board
- White glue
- Sandpaper
- Cotton swabs and/or cotton balls

If possible, visit the New Deal era murals. For mural locations, do an Internet search for New Deal Murals in San Francisco. Alternatively, view images of the Coit Tower Murals, Diego Rivera’s Pan American Unity mural and the Rincon Annex Post Office murals on the Internet, in books or videos. Additionally, view fresco examples from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance periods. Images can be viewed at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fresco](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fresco).

Cut burlap into pieces approximately 8 inch x 8 inch. Place on top a scrap piece of cardboard to protect the table from wet plaster and to have the option of moving it while it is wet. In a mixing bowl measure two cups plaster and one cup water. Blend with the spatula until smooth and creamy. Pour the plaster into a random shape over the burlap square, leaving about ½ inch burlap on the sides. The plaster should be no less than 1/8 inch thick. Gently agitate the cardboard to force air bubbles to rise to the top. Let the plaster dry for one hour. Sand the plaster for a smoother effect.
While the plaster is drying, create sketches on the newsprint. After an hour when the plaster is still damp but not wet, lightly spray with water from a spray bottle. Start your drawing on the plaster and work the plaster and pastel pigment together. Cotton swabs and/or cotton balls can be used to blend or diminish errors by dabbing in water and pulling off the pigment.

When students have completed the drawing process, cover with a thin layer of white glue. Spread the glue around to cover the surface evenly with a small piece of scrap poster board or cardboard. This will seal the chalk and plaster. Do not paint the burlap with glue. Once dry, turn the artwork over and coat the entire back as well.

Display in the classroom and invite discussion.

WEB RESOURCES

A history of the WPA murals in SF: http://www.wpamurals.com/sanfrancisco.html


American Masters, Diego Rivera: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/diego-rivera/introduction/64/

Precita Eyes Mural Center: http://www.precitaeyes.org/

Clarion Alley: http://www.meganwilson.com/related/clarion.php

Balmy Alley: http://www.balmyalley.com/where.html

San Francisco Murals – Walking tour from KQED Spark: http://www.kqed.org/arts/programs/spark/tours-murals.jsp


City College of San Francisco Website: http://www.ccsf.edu/NEW/en/about-city-college/diego-rivera-mural.html


KQED Arts article on Coit Tower WPA Mural: http://www.kqed.org/arts/profile/index.jsp?essid=23728
Coit Tower Mural – Aspects of California Life article

Rincon Center Postal Annex WPA Mural article
http://www.teachingamericanhistory.us/documents_2/summer_09/Rincon_annex_mural.pdf

PRINT RESOURCES

“Genius of the WPA”, Lance Esplund, The New York Sun Newspaper, 1/11/07

“Murals,” Kathleen Wereszynski Murray, Poughkeepsie Journal, 1/12/07


“Arena”, Hallie Flanagan, Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1940


“Painting on the Left,” Anthony W. Lee, University of California Press, 1999


“Sin Nombre: Hispana & Hispano Artists of the New Deal Era” by Tey Marianna Nunn, University of New Mexico Press, 2001


The following KQED videos and educator guides may be used for compare/contrast purposes, and to extend leaning about contemporary muralists:

KQED Arts Education film about Mona Caron and Sirron Norris.

KQED Spark documentary about Mission District Street Art

KQED Spark documentary about artist Laurel True

KQED Spark documentary about Jose Ortiz

KQED Arts Education films about Mike Shine

For more information about KQED’s arts education resources and arts/media workshops for teachers, visit www.KQED.org/Arts, or send an email to ArtsEd@KQED.org.