



## Our Images Make History

Curriculum Unit 93.04.03  
by Diane Platt

### Introduction

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Through this unit I intend to form the groundwork to begin a series of murals in the first floor of my school. There are four sets of arched panels which occupy one hallway of a well travelled area. A perfect space seems to have been waiting to showcase the students work which this unit seeks to develop.

It occurred to me that this project could involve more students than actually work on the execution of the murals. I hope to develop activities involving the student body, in terms of coming up with the themes of these murals. I see a natural link to the Social Studies and Science Departments reflecting different aspects of the school's emphasis. The Spanish and Social Studies Departments in my school both focus a portion of their curriculum on Mexico. I hope to tie into their curriculum, directly focusing on mural making in Mexico and contemporary Chicano muralists.

Seventeen W.P.A. murals are housed at Troup Magnet Academy of Sciences where I am currently teaching. Five are located on a little travelled area in the Guidance wing on the second floor. Ten arched panels are in the Library and in the auditorium are two which the students and community have been exposed to as long as their existence. Seven of the murals were painted in the thirties by Hugo Ohlms, a W.P.A. artist commissioned to represent various events in New Haven history.

The titles of the five panels in the Guidance wing by Hugo Ohlms are:

1. Eaton Landing at Quinnipiac
2. Seven Pillars
3. The Amistad Captives
4. The Founding of Yale
5. Davenport preaching under the Oak

The two panels in the Auditorium by Hugo Ohlms are titled:

1. Lafayette visits New Haven
2. Whitney invents Cotton Gin

The ten arched panels in the School Library appear to have been painted by another artist or group of artists working together. These panels represent ten philosophical figures:

1. Lao-tte
2. Plato
3. Buddha
4. Aristotle
5. Plotinus
6. James
7. Kant
8. Locke
9. Spinoza
10. Aquinas

Although these seventeen murals would appear to be the place to focus my unit I will use them in a more general way as an introduction to the process of mural making and the background logically needed to introduce the W.P.A. section of my unit. I find it particularly challenging to make these murals come alive for my students because of their somber colors and heavy historical and philosophical subject matter. For this reason I have decided to create a historical background setting for mural making and include the Mexican, W.P.A., and Contemporary mural movement across America.

### **Objective**

The main objective of my unit is to introduce mural making to my students and have them create a mural reflecting their ideas and images as a contemporary history within the school setting.

### **Strategies:**

To achieve this objective I have structured my unit into four sections corresponding to the manner in which I would introduce this unit in my classroom.

## **Section One: Mexican Muralists**

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1. Background—political climate in Mexico
2. Diego Rivera—background and slides (see Slides #—)

### 3. Activity No. 1

## Section Two: W.P.A. Muralists

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1. Background—describing how the W.P.A. project began, its purpose, themes representative of the overall program
2. Tour of the Murals at Troup Magnet Academy of Sciences discussion questions at mural sites
3. Review Slides of W.P.A. Muralists (see Slides #—)
4. Activity No.2

## Section Three: Contemporary Muralists

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1. Slide Tour of Murals across America (see Slides #—)
2. Activity No. 3

## Section Four: Creating Our Images of History

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1. Approaches to the process of Mural Making
2. Activities No.4 and 5

## Section Three: Contemporary Muralists

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### ***Introduction:***

Contemporary Muralists range from trained professionals to students of art to non-professionals with inspiration to record their images on often very unpermanent walls and surfaces recorded only by a photograph or discovered by a passer-by. Mural painting is not learned in controlled studio courses, and rarely mentioned in art—history courses. Most muralists learned in the streets by doing it. A great number of murals began to appear on city walls during the sixties, particularly in Los Angeles, California, and then in many of

the major cities across the United States in the seventies.

Actually through my own exposure to murals in New York, Boston and New Haven, I became interested to research further and develop this unit for my students. In developing this unit I recalled that I had designed and executed a billboard mural in New Haven in 1975 through a grant from the Connecticut Union of Visual Artists (no longer in existence) in cooperation with the Garnett Outdoor billboard company. It was a tremendous experience taking a one by three inch design and enlarging it to 8 feet by 20 feet. It actually was able to be viewed from Route I-95N out of New Haven on the Branford line.

Images of the people's own story, their history and struggles, their dignity and hopes are expressed in these contemporary wall records. Another name for the art of the mural makers is "People's Art". Often missing in any study of contemporary art is the art which is not for the art buying public, but the art of the inner-city reflecting everyday images of humanity. Brian O'Doherty, director of Visual Arts Program for the National Endowment for the Arts, writes: "Equally important has been the recognition of the inner city mural phenomenon, which was carried through in an irrefutable sweep of feeling not by a single artist, but by groups of artists, and not just by artists, but by an entire class, one that is usually far removed from privilege . . . its search [was] not for an audience, but for an arena to display the values of its audience . . ." <sup>3</sup>

The murals we will tour through the slides accompanying this unit are not the same in intent as the idealization of small town America in the W.P.A. murals nor the historical, politically influenced, murals of Diego Rivera. However, in viewing some of the Los Angeles murals by contemporary Chicano artists there is definitely a reflection of Rivera's humanistic and social concern.

I have not included the graffiti artists in this unit except for Keith Haring whom is now known throughout the world for his incredibly prolific style and his initiation of his work outside the mainstream. The art establishment eventually came to him and he enjoyed a celebrated status with numerous gallery shows, permanent installations, and on-site painting commissions on five continents. I highly recommend "Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography" (see Bibliog.) for further understanding of the distinct vitality of his contribution.

I would encourage discussions with students at points of interest when they respond favorably to a given mural. Rather than spell out a series of questions to ask, I feel it necessary to bring out the reactions from the particular group of students participating in this project. The images will naturally give them many ideas of what they might like to create because of their relevant nature.

You can review the slides with your students as if you are touring the United States. The slides are arranged in sequence beginning in California and ending in New York (see Slides #35-69). Although I intended to have more representative slides from a greater variety of cities I became more concerned with a choice of imagery than a geographical approach. I have included some notes in the Slide Reference section at the end of this unit which you may find helpful.

## Conclusion

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For an art teacher this unit forms the framework of not only introducing mural making but at the same time focusing on concepts that the students are investigating: shape, color, perspective, scale, line, tone etc. The murals can be sophisticated or simple based on the understanding and needs of the students.

Taken in light of the background presented in this unit my hope is that the students will grow in self-esteem as well as skills as “Our Images Make History” becomes a part of their understanding of how artists reflect the values of our culture.

## Notes

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1. “Diego Rivera: A Retrospective,” (New York/London,W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), p.53.
2. Ibid., p. 187.
3. Eva Cockcroft, John Weber, James Cockcroft, “Toward A People’s Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement,” (New York, E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1977), p. xxiii.

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