

Mural Projects – A Cumulative Study

Carmen Pitz

Faculty Sponsor: Jennifer Williams-Terpstra, Department of Art

ABSTRACT

This research included a look into the historical and contemporary examples of mural projects in addition to techniques and its use as a teaching tool. The results of this research included a unit plan and a collaborative mural.

INTRODUCTION

My research topic of mural projects in the U.S. was a four-fold sequence of research and practice. The four topics that I addressed in this problem was the historical presence of murals, examples of contemporary mural projects, techniques in mural painting, and the use of murals as a teaching tool. By implementing this research in a collaborative mural project of my own, I combined all of my research to provide me with a hands-on experience of using murals as a teaching tool. This project provided me with an outline of methods, techniques, and practices that I will be able to apply in my career as an art educator. The proposed outcomes of this project included an increased understanding of the historical aspects of mural painting, visits to contemporary mural sites to obtain an understanding of current mural projects and how they operate, a framework and structural aspects of the collaborative mural, an understanding of the motivation and goals of these projects and how they coincide with those of the Girl Scouts, and the necessary technical components to carry out the final product.

METHODS

The first step in my research process was to investigate the techniques of mural making both past and present through archival research and visits to contemporary mural sites. Mostly, this research involved a definition of terms that are used in the mural making process. Murals have been involved in art history since the beginning of human civilizations. This involvement can be characterized in several ways related to the purposes and materials used. In the second method of my research, I focused on some important influences to mural painting and the history of mural painters and mural projects in the Midwest.

The idea of a process creating a sense of community both among the artists involved and the surrounding public sparked my interest in modern mural projects. The two projects that I chose to research in depth were the Mural Arts Program in Philadelphia, and the Public Art Group along with Gallery 37 in Chicago. The third part of this research was done through travel and interviews in Philadelphia. The techniques that were used historically differ greatly from the types of materials used today. Therefore, these interviews provided me with contemporary examples of techniques and materials.

It is with these inspirations of an age old history and a contemporary example of community that I moved into the camp mural part of my research; putting my research into true practice.

RESULTS

The final product of this research was a mural at the Girl Scout summer camp where I work (See picture below). The first part of this process was sharing my research of mural artists and techniques. This sharing served as a motivation and inspiration to the next step in which I would gather ideas from the campers as to the theme and design of the mural. A group of high school age campers in residence for three consecutive weeks were essential to the culmination of this research project. By completing this mural, the girls developed their skills in the visual arts and experienced a collaborative effort in problem solving.

In addition to this painted mural, my results included detailed papers outlining all of my research findings and documentation of all of the work done on the mural. During the fall semester, I took an independent art seminar course in which I reflected on my discoveries and my projects and created a unit plan that I will be able to use with my future classrooms.



DISCUSSION/ REFLECTIONS

The final product of this research project was by far the most beneficial part of my research. This is true because it taught me much about the mechanics of creating a mural, the problems that arise from encouraging a group of high school students in their artistic visions, and the process that arises from this artistic endeavor.

The most encouraging part of this portion of the process was seeing the girls use references to the murals from Chicago. One girl even went to the extent to point out how one artist in the book had used images to represent a bigger idea. This enforced the idea that the girls had learned something from our discussion of symbols and how we could use them.

When the final day had arrived to start painting, the enthusiasm of these girls was unbelievable! They had finally finished all planning and were ready to put their plans into action.

We spent a weekend at camp priming the panels and using charcoal to sketch outlines for the mural. This is another time where their insecurities of drawing came into play. The girls were convinced that they could not draw, were not artists, and were not capable of carrying out this process. It was at this point that we talked as a group about the capability of every individual to draw. For this encouragement, I did some demonstration of drawing “secrets” and gave them hints on what sort of representations that we were talking about. The girls realized that since the basis of our mural was symbolism, that they would use symbolic representations of the items and not realistic representations.

This is when the true creative spirit of these artists shown through. The girls split up into groups of two, one group for each panel. But, their teamwork came through when they started collaborating throughout all of the panels. This was an activity that strengthened their beliefs in themselves as a team and as individual artists. For the first time in this process, I felt content with the results and could see the inevitable learning possibilities of this process. They had moved from the negativity of chaos and headed into the consensus of community.

This idea continued into the painting process. One beautiful day, we painted all day long and completed the mural. The girls worked together diligently to reach their goal. This is the point at which the girls began to gain true pride in their work and also the point at which I became a member of their team instead of a facilitator. I aided the girls in painting parts of the mural and made recommendations from their ideas. The extent to which this was a learning experience in art techniques was immense! They were learning these by hands on experiences, experimentation and discovery. This was definitely not a textbook learning experience.

After the completion of the mural, I added the overlays of hands and also gave the girls an outline of questions to spark their artist statements. Below are some of the responses to these questions that I received. Overall, this was both a project of learning and teaching involving teamwork and self-discovery.

List of questions and selected responses from the artists

What is something that you learned during this mural project? (Either about yourself or the art)

“... You must listen to everyone’s ideas and try to put them all together so that everyone is satisfied.”

– Dana Barbour “Lula”

“ I learned that I am more artistic than I thought. I didn’t think that I was very good at drawing anything, but I learned that if I took my time I could actually draw something very nicely. I also learned about mixing colors and the different colors that you can make.”

– Samantha Heiser “Summer”

What do you feel is the most significant message in this mural?

“ I feel the most significant message is cooperation. Cooperation allowed us to create the mural; it allows water to carve the landscape, the fire to be built, the flag ceremony, and friendship. It is and was the base of the mural.”

– Kellie Larson “Salsa”

How do you feel about the mural making process?

“At the beginning, I never thought that it was going to happen, but it did.”

– Carina Johnson “Geige”

“It’s very interesting and a little intimidating. I didn’t think I could do it at first but then when we got started it was almost easy. It was a lot of fun and really cool to see our ideas on the boards.”

–Holly Grivois “Maizie”

“I feel that the mural making process was a good thing because it shows that young teens like us can do something cool and that takes time.”

– Beth Eddy “Ginger”

What was the most difficult aspect of this project?

“No one thought that they had any drawing capability, but once we got going and took our time it wasn’t as difficult as we thought. Another difficult part was moving the panels inside and outside.”

– Samantha Heiser “Summer”

“I feel that the most difficult aspect of this project was to be able to listen to everyone’s ideas and to try to put them together. Also, having everyone’s art abilities at different levels was difficult.”

– Dana Barbour “Lula”

“Working together to create something that we all enjoyed. Everyone has a different initial vision, and to incorporate all aspects with good flow was difficult.”

– Kellie Larson “Salsa”

Additional Comments

“It was very rewarding to me and now I will have something at camp forever that I helped make and that means a lot to me.”

–Beth Eddy “Ginger”

“This project was fun and a great learning experience for us all!”

– Dana Barbour “Lula”

“The aspect of this project that I enjoyed most was being able to leave a mark on Camp Ehawee, a place that means so much to me.”

– Kellie Larson “Salsa”

LIMITATIONS

There were some limitations in carrying out this project. It was a challenge to fully fund the project. I obtained some supplemental funding and donations to complete the mural and to take my second trip to Chicago. Also, there was a limit of time. The girls only had three weeks to complete a project that should probably last at least a month. Several of them stated that they felt too rushed. The limit of time also factored into my Chicago travels. There was not much time to take the trip, and the leaders of the Chicago projects were not very receptive to meeting with me, unlike those of the Philadelphia projects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people that aided in the completion of this project. First, and most importantly, I want to thank Jennifer Williams-Terpstra for her contributions of time, effort, and guidance through this project. Without her help, I would have never made it through this research grant process. I would also like to thank Sarah Resch, the director of Camp Ehawee, for donating her time, patience, and support through this whirlwind of painting. Finally, I want to thank Mautz Paint and Ben Franklin Crafts. Without the donations of paint and painting supplies from these generous businesses, the creative endeavors of these young people would have never seen completion.

REFERENCES

- Gray, Olivia and Jeff Huebner. Urban Art Chicago: A Guide to community murals, mosaics, and sculptures. 2000.
- Gray, Mary Lackritz. A Guide to Chicago's Murals. The University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Voices of Community: The Murals of Philadelphia. Mural Arts Program, 2000.
- www.muralarts.org
- Encarta.msn.com
- www.javox.com
- www.sparcmurals.org
- www.gophila.com
- www.gallery37.org
- www.muralart.org
- www.diegorivera.com