

Priorities in Conserving Community Murals

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Preface

The following essay was originally presented at “Mural Painting and Conservation in the Americas,” a two-day symposium sponsored by the Getty Research Institute and the Getty Conservation Institute, May 16–17, 2003, at the Getty Center in Los Angeles.

At this event, a cross-disciplinary roster of art historians, conservators, and artists discussed the social, artistic, and political dimensions of murals, the value they hold for different constituencies, and the rationale and conservation techniques for ensuring their long-term survival.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not represent the views of the J. Paul Getty Trust.

[Editor's note: This essay was conceived as one part of a three-part examination. The other two are John Pitman Weber's discussion regarding which murals get saved and Jon Pounds's exposition of conservation projects in Chicago.]

Traditional conservators confront a challenging set of issues that must be resolved prior to the restoration of any community mural. This essay offers a tentative attempt to systematize the issues that such a conservation project might face. It articulates the necessary decisions as they have been discussed over the past decade or so.

In some cases, the special nature of community murals creates conflicts with conservators' normal practices, so it is useful to begin by considering briefly the differences between community murals and other forms of painting. To do that, it is necessary to better understand the nature of community murals. (I will use the word *conservation* generically to include restoration, maintenance, repainting, and preservation, because the important questions are not about literal preservation so much as about the processes controlling it.)

The crucial point has nothing to do with the technical aspects of materials, surfaces, and exposure; nor is it a matter of incorporating the visual field, especially architecture, into the design; nor is it a matter of size, but of the "social field." I have seen community "dance murals," heard "word murals," and witnessed artists holding up postcard-sized paintings that they called murals. What is going on here? It is this: community murals are primarily social. They exist at the interface of the social and the artistic, but insofar as conservation is concerned, the key fact is to recognize that they are part of an ongoing social process. We use the word *community* for this social field in which community murals exist. It refers to the daily audience of the mural as well as to its producers and to the painting itself. This combination, whose interests generated the mural (otherwise it is not a community mural), is the most important aspect of any conservation project. However, the fact is that over time people in communities, including artists, change their attitudes, their likes and dislikes. Their murals reflect this variability, this dynamism. This changeability presents unique problems for conservators.

So for community mural conservation, the most important factors are the determinant social contexts surrounding each mural, the complex social field of which the mural is a dynamic acrylic symbol. Many murals preserve marginalized or devalued histories specific to particular locations that have become recognized as significant to the broader society. It is unclear to me whether or not civic and government agencies, other institutional bureaucracies, or, indeed, the conservation community itself fully understand and share this priority. This situation is one reason that collaboration is essential in the conservation of community murals.

For conservators, conservation of murals requires a different approach than usual. The traditional conservator's job has been to conserve a static object, but community murals are not static—or they are, but only in a very limited sense. This observation does not mean that conservators have no role in the restoration of community works. Conservators bring vast technical knowledge to any project, expertise that is invaluable to any successful conservation. The fact is, many muralists and communities would like a conservator to do the work with no changes in imagery. If there are no problems, fine. Obviously, collaboration among “the community” and its artists and conservators (and others) is the optimum basis of successful community mural preservation. But problems can arise. Differences between accepted conservators' practices and a community muralist can be determined and then resolved only in conjunction with the community, as described below. The roles of the several participants in a proposed conservation project must be reconceived in light of a community mural's distinctive characteristics—that is, considered not merely as an art object but, most importantly, as part of a social process. The conservation of a painted surface must conserve the social, creative process of the original work as well as the painting itself. I will use a new word for this: *sociocreative*. With community murals, the goal of conservation is to preserve the entire sociocreative project.

We can further clarify the issues regarding conservation of community murals in their sociocreative entirety by asking a series of questions and offering tentative answers:

1. Which murals should be saved?

2. How should it be determined which should be saved (or, who should make this determination)?
3. Who should determine what changes are allowed? Can general criteria be developed here, or is each case sui generis?
4. Who should pay? Who can pay?

Which Murals Should Be Saved?

To put this question another way, a way in which the interests of the community are put first: Whose history, culture, and expression will be conserved?

Because they lack traditional market value, murals are problematic as “just” paintings; that is, their value needs to be calculated differently than in solely monetary or physical terms. This determination requires a complex interaction with the people who live or work with the mural on a daily basis. If the mural’s meaning is not discussed and debated in the community, then the mural is not really public; it is done to or for its audience, not with or by it. With a focus on the murals themselves, those determining which murals are most worthy of preservation must consider the mural’s significance in relation to the following criteria (in no particular order): neighborhood/community desires (determining significance requires a knowledge not only of the meaning of the image but also of why the image is in the mural as it is), mural art history, aesthetics, and the artist’s canon. The basic outlines of this approach were developed as part of the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) Mural Maintenance and Inventory Program in the early 1990s, for which I was a panelist. Its director, Judith F. Baca, wrote her version in “Public Participation in Conservation 1: The Great Wall of Los Angeles” (in Hafthor Yngvason, ed., *Conservation and Maintenance of Contemporary Public Art* [Cambridge, Mass.: Archetype Publications, 2002], 21–29).

Problems may arise if there is a difference of interests between the local level and the civic institutions. One can imagine a clash between neighborhood desires to make changes and official desires not to make changes, or vice versa. Processes must favor the neighborhood

interests, but in some extreme cases, the best way (perhaps the only way) to preserve a historically significant mural might be to support the creation of a changed mural, or a new mural in addition to the old one, as part of the conservation. The suggestion that conservation might involve painting a new mural strikes conservators I have spoken with, and some muralists, as unreasonable.

Who Should Make the Determination?

The only possible way to answer this question fairly is to convene a panel of people who have extensive involvement with community murals and who collectively know the local histories of a mural in question: people who know the relevant art history, people who know the neighborhood history and its involvement with each mural, people trained to consider aesthetic questions (pertinent to several, simultaneous factors at any given time), possibly the property owner, and possibly representatives of a proposed conserving organization. Information (possibly including a conservator's report) about the precise technical requirements of conservation should also be obtained.

This is not such a tall order. Such a committee can be convened in every place where murals are painted. The dangers are political interference: any influence that would reduce the importance of the community in the process or that would try to take control of the process. Funders and civic bureaucracies, in particular, can “stack” such committees, unless the panels are made up only of people whose top priority is mural conservation.

The first task of any such panel is to inventory possible candidates for conservation—that is, all the murals in a location. Initially, they can be divided into three categories: (1) most significant and most vulnerable, (2) most significant but less vulnerable, and (3) the remainder. The murals selected as the most likely for conservation in the first category must then be assessed by a conservator, and in conjunction with the original artists, decisions will be made as to the course to follow. The panel selects which murals are to be formally assessed and, finally, which are to be treated.

What about Design Changes?

Some muralists want protection from changes. Some don't. Artists should have veto power over their work. But what sorts of changes should be allowed, or should suggested additions be made? Who should decide? Obviously, I think the local panel should have the final decision, and to some extent each mural is its own special case, but there are considerations that will apply to virtually every mural.

It is relatively easy to agree that basic steps should be taken periodically to maintain a mural, such as covering it with a protective coating. In other cases, the problems are more complex. While in traditional conservation, the current goal is to regain the original state of the painting (or what is left of it), as in the recent *Last Supper* restoration, the goal of conservation of community murals should be to meet the desires of the murals' social field or to meet the dual goals of community and "art history." This means that the local panel should decide what changes will be allowed. In reality, there will probably be a great deal of repainting.

In easel conservatorship, a basic rule is that any addition must be reversible. Is this principle compatible with the need for permanence (even relative permanence in the form of a new coat of paint)? Remember, as John Pitman Weber points out, "repainting does not embalm a mural. It just gives it another twenty years as living art."

Should original artists always have the choice of restoring their murals? If not, should they get to decide who will do the restoration work?

It is not uncommon for many hands to paint a mural, even though it may be identified with a particular artist (in a working mode similar to that of Renaissance workshops). Who restores these? Who has standing to be considered? Who decides? I argue in favor of the panel I have described above.

Because a community mural is only part of an ongoing social process and because its importance extends beyond contracts and formal ownership, we must be careful here not to get lost in the law, because even if a lawyer is a community advocate, the community can easily be

removed from control of its space when a project is seen in legal terms. Is there, and should there ever be, a point at which a community loses control?

Let me cite five examples of the sorts of things we are talking about here:

1. *Dreams of Flight* in Estrada Courts, Los Angeles (Figures 1 and 2): Small changes made by the original artist, David Botello, elicited no complaints at all. Botello updated details without altering the basic meaning or design of the mural. Specifically, he changed the gender of a central figure from a boy to a girl and turned a baseball cap around to match contemporary style. Small changes, no complaints.



Figure 1 David Botello, *Dreams of Flight*, 1973–78, in its original state. Approx. 24 x 32 ft. Estrada Courts, Los Angeles. Photo: Eva Cockcroft.



Figure 2 *Dreams of Flight*, after revision of 1996. Photo: Tim Drescher.

2. *Song of Unity* at La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley (Figures 3 and 4): Again, original artists made changes but did not significantly alter the original design ideas. A ceramic quetzal was added in specific recognition of Central American cultures, and its tail feathers were extended off the wall across part of the sidewalk in front of the mural. Decisions were made by the artists in conjunction with the building owners. Some changes. No complaints.



Figure 3 Commonarts (R. Patlán, B. Thiele, O. Neumann, A. DeLeon), *Song of Unity*, 1978, in its original state. Approx. 15 x 40 ft. La Peña Cultural Center, Berkeley, California. Reproduced courtesy of Commonarts, San Francisco. Photo: Tim Drescher.



Figure 4 *Song of Unity*, after revision of 1998 by Commonarts with Joanna Cooke. Reproduced courtesy of Commonarts. Photo: Tim Drescher.

3. *Quetzalcoatl* in the minipark at Twenty-fourth and Bryant streets in San Francisco's Mission District, painted in 1974 (Figures 5–7): Here the original artist, Michael Rios, changed the mural after it was painted, most obviously in altering the color of the sky, but he kept the same basic design. Some years later, with the artist's permission, the mural was restored by two other muralists, who changed the palette of the mural to

more hip-hop tones, appropriate for the early 1990s, when this restoration was executed. No complaints; the audience was glad to have a cleaner mural and also glad to have it brighter and more current. This example raises another, more general question, which seems to have been answered in traditional conservation but which is worth raising again in this context: What attention, if any, should be given to previous restoration work, especially if it included significant inpainting or actual design changes, as just described? Is the work of the original artist always the baseline? Isn't the work of a restorer also part of the community process and thus deserving of respect in the conservation of a mural?



Figure 5 Michael Rios, with Anthony Machado and Richard Montez, *Quetzalcoatl* (detail), 1974, in its original state. Approx. 12 x 32 ft. Twenty-fourth and Bryant streets, San Francisco. Reproduced courtesy of Michael Rios. *Photo*: Tim Drescher.



Figure 6 *Quetzalcoatl*, after it was revised by Michael Rios soon after its completion. Reproduced courtesy of Michael Rios. *Photo*: Tim Drescher.



Figure 7 *Quetzalcoatl* as repainted in 1991 by Miranda Bergman and Susan Greene. Reproduced courtesy of Michael Rios. *Photo*: Tim Drescher.

4. Chicano Park in San Diego: The original wall had an Olmec head, which most of the original artists wanted to change to a devil figure. One artist opposed to this change managed to stop the alteration by threatening legal action. Major alterations in meaning, serious complaints.
5. *Our History Is No Mystery* in San Francisco (Figure 8): This mural was regularly defaced (by the same hand), then cleaned by volunteers and some of the original artists. No design changes were made. Finally, some fifteen years after it was dedicated, it was removed and replaced by an entirely new mural, called *Educate to Liberate*, painted by members of the original team and others who joined in for the creation of the new mural (Figure 9). Since there were no objections to this course of action, there were no problems. But what if the mural had been given landmark status, or what if someone had objected to its being painted out? Who has such standing? Should anyone outside the mural's immediate community have such standing?

The question raised by all these examples is this: How is it to be decided which changes are acceptable and which are not? All that is clear, to me at least, is that a mechanism must be established that permits community members to stop unacceptable changes but that allows acceptable ones. *Acceptable* means simply what they like or don't like, for their reasons. That is what is meant by *dynamic*. That is what is meant by *community*.



Figure 8 Haight-Ashbury Muralists, *Our History Is No Mystery* (detail), 1976. Approx. 2–12 ft. x 390 ft. Hayes Street and Masonic Avenue, San Francisco. Reproduced courtesy of the artists. *Photo*: Tim Drescher.



Figure 9 Haight-Ashbury Muralists, *Educate to Liberate* (detail), 1988. Approx. 2–12 ft. x 390 ft. Hayes Street and Masonic Avenue, San Francisco. Reproduced courtesy of the artists. Photo: Tim Drescher.

Who Should Pay to Restore Community Murals? Who Can Pay?

The basic reality is that communities where the murals are located are rarely able to pay either for the creation of murals or for their conservation.

There are community-based organizations that can carry out the conservation—the key being the group that organized the project, not just the one that paid for it. Successful restorations along these lines have been carried out in Chicago, San Francisco, San Diego, and other cities. One quails at the involvement of civic or government institutions, precisely because they do not, and probably cannot, adequately understand these works. There are exceptions, of course, but government priorities are most likely different from those of communities.

Government's role is to provide money, advice, and equipment/material support, but not to make the decisions beyond that. Cities must recognize that they have a responsibility to preserve significant works, even if the city government was not officially involved in any way with their creation. A city's responsibility is to benefit its citizens, not just to maintain those things it paid for.

Each of the above points deserves more careful examination in the work toward the ultimate goal of developing a positive relationship between those who produce murals and those who wish to preserve them.

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