

With muralism, Mexico's rich tradition of public art extends well beyond its borders

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Judy Woodruff:

Street art is now hitting gallery walls in New York.

It began in Mexico with a trio of muralists in the 1920s.

Jeffrey Brown traveled to Mexico City before the pandemic to explore the movement's influence then and now.

It is part of our ongoing coverage of arts and culture, Canvas.

Jeffrey Brown:

In Mexico City, along bustling streets, well-kept parks, and giant walls of low-income housing, signs of a vibrant public art scene.

Cynthia Arvide:

The art movement of the world is street art.

Jeffrey Brown:

Cynthia Arvide is author of "Muros Somos," or "We Are Walls," a look at this rebirth of Mexican street art.

The artists here, she says, are part of a generation largely exposed to public art online, influenced by international graffiti stars like Banks. Some of their themes are distinctly Mexican, colors, pre-Hispanic symbols and imagery, local plants and animals. Some focus on the country's problems, drugs, violence, poverty and corruption.

Cynthia Arvide:

Mexico is definitely a country of contrasts. You have these vibrant colors side by side with this really grim, violent society. And it's happening, it's alive with all of the good, all of the bad, all of the in-between. And I think artists, they feed their art from that.

Jeffrey Brown:

But muralism here also looks to an extraordinary past and one of the world's great art movements.

It began a century ago, at the end of Mexico's bloody revolution, when a new government looking to unite a fractured nation commissioned the likes of Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros to help create a sense of shared identity.

You can still see it in spectacular form at the Ministry of Public Education, where Rivera painted thousands of square feet of frescoes in the mid-1920s, highlighting a world of workers, domestic life, conflict, and continued political volatility.

At another mural mecca, San Ildefonso, we met art historian Renato Gonzalez Mello. Once Mexico's national preparatory school, this is home to Rivera's first commissioned work, The Creation, as well as a number of Orozco's key works, including one called The Trench, depicting revolutionary soldiers.

Renato Gonzales Mello (through translator):

The murals are historical paintings. Historical paintings are still considered the highest form of art. And when this project began, they were obviously thinking about explaining what the new order was.

They represent a part of society that had never been represented officially, that had never appeared in paintings, nor photography, nothing, that had been excluded from the national image.

Jeffrey Brown:

By the end of the 1920s, mural commissions in Mexico were declining, and the big three painters moved North, where they began to influence a generation of U.S. artists.

That became the focus of a major exhibition at the Merchant Whitney Museum in New York, now reopened after being closed during the pandemic.

Vida Americana:

Mexican Muralists Remake American Art has some 200 works, including side-by-side comparisons.

Barbara Haskell:

This show proves that the Mexican artists had the most profound influence far, exceeding the French, during these two decades.

Jeffrey Brown:

The most?

Barbara Haskell:

Absolutely.

They allowed American artists to get a new conception of what art was, that art was something social, that it wasn't just about form and color, that it really had to relate to people's lives, had to tell stories that were accessible and modern.

Jeffrey Brown:

Diego Rivera famously created a 27-panel mural in the courtyard of the Detroit Institute of Arts, funded by Edsel Ford.

Jose Clemente Orozco received his first U.S. commission in 1930, at Pomona College in California. He painted a dramatic image of the Greek titan Prometheus. Nothing like it had been seen in the States, and his work caught the eye of a young Jackson Pollock.

Jackson Pollock sees this, and...

Barbara Haskell:

And he changes his work.

Jeffrey Brown:

Pollock also attended a workshop in New York led by David Alfaro Siqueiros, who encouraged unconventional techniques.

Barbara Haskell:

Doing things like, they would put canvas on the floor and throw paint, splatter paint on it, throw things like cigarettes and pieces of wood on it. It liberated the idea of how you could make a painting.

Jeffrey Brown:

And the influence of style, but also subject matter, as here in a large painting by the American artist Charles White.

Barbara Haskell:

The idea that the muralists had presented indigenous rural population as being the bedrock of Mexican identity, that became...

Jeffrey Brown:

Changing Mexican history gave him an idea.

Barbara Haskell:

Exactly.

So, Charles White, the idea that you would insert African Americans into the sweep of American history, was something revolutionary. No one had ever done that.

Jeffrey Brown:

Back in Mexico City, today's street artists are also influenced by the past greats.

Edgar Flores, known as Saner, first saw an image of Orozco's Trench is a boy printed on a Mexican peso. He didn't know it was from a mural until he saw the real thing.

Edgar Flores (through translator):

They took me to San Ildefonso. And there was that mural, impressive, large, with other colors, and it was very dramatic.

Jeffrey Brown:

Today, Saner's own work can be found on walls around the world, including his hometown of Mexico City.

He wants to explore political and social issues of his day, he told us, in a way that is positive and public.

Edgar Flores (through translator):

Public space is very sacred for me. It's a bit like that muralism I learned from Diego Rivera and others.

You can criticize, but you also have to advance. What are you going to change, not only complaints? Instead, share solutions.

Jeffrey Brown:

Big problems, big solutions, and very big art.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jeffrey Brown in Mexico City.

By – **Jeffrey Brown**

Jeffrey Brown is the chief correspondent for arts, culture and society at PBS NewsHour.

By – **Sam Lane**

Sam Lane is reporter/producer in PBS NewsHour's segment unit.

 **@lanesam**