

INDIANAPOLIS MURALS

Outdoor Murals- Introduction

The artists who produce street art are, indeed 'artists', though of a certain ilk. They have no patience for gallery games, or commercial constraints, so they take their individual passions directly to the public, right out on the street, certain their labors of love will not survive, sometimes even risking the law. And like great jazz artists, these yardbirds of color and form must improvise to fit their art to the beat of whatever wall and street they find to play... Bob Edelson, *New American Street Art* [1]

Some say that street art is the most exciting of all graphic art. It has taken several years of wandering the streets of Indianapolis (Marion County) and when least expecting it, turning a corner and encountering a beautiful piece of art, to appreciate the number and variety of murals in our city. Sharing this experience is the main reason for this book.

Bob Edelson writes in *New American Street Art*, "When you make a discovery of street art, it hits you as a visual surprise; dazzling, because of the combination of dynamic, well-executed graphics, the wall it is painted on, the texture of the wall, and the entire, sometimes seedy, street setting, all of it, coming at you all at once. Almost all street art is short-lived, either painted over, destroyed when the building is removed, or simply succumbing to the elements and to deterioration." [2]

So documentation becomes another reason for writing this book.

It is safe to say then, that the two main purposes of this book are to document the exterior mural tradition in Indianapolis and to dazzle the reader with the beauty and surprise of this improvisational art form. I will also touch on the history of mural painting in this country and on outdoor murals related to the political and social history of Indianapolis.

Since mural art had some of its beginnings in advertising, the first chapter is about old signs that are still around and ghost signs that are fading but still visible. Some recent signs that are unusual or illustrate an artistic treatment of an advertising theme will also be discussed.

It was surprising to find many murals motivated by political and social movements. Indianapolis can't compete with Chicago and Los Angeles in this respect, but it has more murals than meet the eye in that some no longer exist and some are in out of the way locations. Political artists willingly or unwillingly are not a part of the billion dollar advertising industry. A common tactic among cultural activists today is to engage in irreverent acts of creativity that "take over the public space" or "reclaim the street." From altering billboard and street signs to performing theater for surveillance cameras, contemporary interventionist art practice assails unexpected public spaces with often witty, politically subversive and disruptive artwork. [2b]



Fig. 2-Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in 2005. (Our first work of "public art") The Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument was designed by German architect Bruno Schmitz, and was completed in 1901. [2a]

Some cities such as Los Angeles have developed community based public art movements founded in working-class aesthetics, culture and politics. Schools teach mural-making, exchange of ideas, experience, and imagery and how visions of the city have changed since the 1930's to the 21st century. Indianapolis is subtler in its political street art, but a chapter is devoted to the history of the Hispanic mural influence, the community mural movement and social movements such as the labor movement and civil rights movement. Also covered are current issues such as environmentalism and neighborhood improvement as they impact this city's mural art.

More than one patriotic mural can be found in our city which hosted the Pan Am Games in 1987, houses the American Legion Headquarters and proudly commemorates the USS Indianapolis with a memorial on the downtown canal walk. Of course a good number of school and church murals are present in keeping with the importance that the city places on education and religion. I have included a representative sample of outside school and church murals, while acknowledging that most of the better examples of school and church wall paintings are inside the respective buildings. Other community issues such as protecting the environment and celebrating diversity are treated in murals on the Monon trail and other city greenways. The greenway movement and the art it has inspired contribute to the largest chapter in the book.

The Community Mural Movement, which was so important to the creation of murals all over the country, is covered in the Labor, Race, Politics and Patriotism chapter. The origins are discussed and some examples given from other cities. How did the Community Mural Movement originate? Several authors have expressed well researched opinions on this topic, and a few of these follow.

There was little influence from the New Deal murals on the community mural movement because white painters painted them, and they were painted in traditional styles. What connection there is between the imagery of community murals and New Deal murals is their common source, the Mexican mural tradition. Orozco and Rivera had an effect on John Weber and Jose Guerrero who painted the United Electrical Workers' labor temple in Chicago and many other murals in this tradition. [3]

However an indirect influence came from black artists who found support in the colleges of the South. Of course community murals were a big part of the civil rights movement in cities all over the country. Although Indianapolis was again more conservative in that it had no overt racial violence, it did have race related murals. One example frequently found here was veneration of civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. Another example found here in Indianapolis in only a few murals, but which is a huge tradition in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens, is the practice of doing a memorial mural of a person killed in the neighborhood. [4]



Fig. 3- **The Nature of Indy** – A mural on the Monon Trail



Fig. 4
The Nature of Indy
 A mural on the Monon
 Trail

Both the Mexicans who painted in the 1920's and the muralists in the United States in the 60's and 70's broke loose from orthodox styles. In the case of the Mexicans that style was Cubism. The Americans rejected New York modern including splashes and blobs of paint and performance art. [4a] The mural movement in the 60's also coincided with the desire of artists to move out from the museums. In the space of a few years, there was a bewildering succession of styles. Painting went from Pop to Op to Minimal as well as mixed media and audience-participation art, environmental art, happenings, and disposable art, computer art, light art, and machine art. Even then there was a taboo against the insertion of social content into art. Under industrial capitalism, the artist, like other marginal small producers, is squeezed by the force of market competition. [4b]

Of the visual arts, community murals are uniquely a performance art, and a few muralists here in Indy have evolved into full-fledged performance artists. But painting a mural is like performance art in that it is an ongoing sequence of intense activity, more full of meaning and feeling than most because it draws out the imagination and skills of people to help them come to grips with serious public concerns. A mural may give local people experience, if not in making art, then in writing leaflets and press releases, doing photo documentation and research, writing grants and organizing. The artist usually learns from the community as well. Others regard murals as environmental art and are willing to help a neighborhood do any kind of mural it wants. [4c]

But the mural movement that started in 1967 and was called the community mural movement, public art movement, the contemporary mural renaissance, people's art, or simply street art produced hundreds upon hundreds of large-scale wall paintings in less than a decade. [4d] Murals spread across the nation as part of the general creative outburst accompanying the various community organizing efforts and community-development programs.



Fig. 4b **Clayton Hamilton Message Wall**, 3948 N. College