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## Muralismo in St. Paul

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Detail of "Aztec City," a mural painted by John Acosta, Frank Sanchez, and Carlos Menchaca at 736 Robert Street, St. Paul, between 1980 and 1983. Photograph by Teresa Boardman, May 5, 2007. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Public art created during the late 1960s and early 1970s responded to the destruction of America's inner cities. Chicanos painted murals in their neighborhoods to express their cultural pride, to protest injustice, and to celebrate their aesthetic values. While many of the first Chicano murals painted on St. Paul's West Side are now lost, murals continue to reflect the community's growth and progress.

Influenced by the work of Los tres grandes (the three greats: Diego Rivera, José Orozco, and David Alfaro

Siqueiros) and post-Mexican Revolution ideologies, the Chicano mural movement claimed the urban sphere as public space for Chicano people. Artists reshaped the visual environment of their barrios (neighborhoods) through historical counter-narratives that celebrated pre-Columbian ethnic pride while centering local communal history. Chicano murals told the story of La Raza (the people) in an empowering way to affirm its ideals and educate barrio residents about alternative histories of protest.

National organizations such as the Crusade for Justice, La Raza Unida Party, and the United Farm Workers financed Chicano artists' work to amplify their own political message. Public art projects recruited lead artists, artists' collectives, neighborhood activists, and youth volunteers, giving the entire community ownership over murals. They painted in schools, in public parks, on freeway support pillars, and on the walls of local businesses. In this way, they beautified public space at a time when federal urban renewal programs and highways were transforming American cities.

The Chicano muralismo movement in St. Paul, similarly, promoted ethnic pride and self-determination in a barrio under redevelopment. When city officials cleared the flood-prone [West Side Flats](#) during the early 1960s, they forcibly displaced long-settled Mexican American families to Concord Terrace. To recreate the close-knit community of the Flats, two influential community organizations, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and Neighborhood House, relocated to Concord Terrace. Chicano artists painted powerful images in public spaces there to celebrate Mexican culture and advocate for [the West Side's Chicano movement](#), claiming ownership over this new neighborhood. Portrayals included the Aztec and Indigenous heritage of the Mexican American people in localized heroic stories of immigrant working-class livelihood.

Gabriel Romo and Jose Estrada were two of the first Chicano artists to paint a Chicano-oriented mural in St. Paul, in 1969. They painted the interior of the Guadalupe Area Project building with a series of Aztec deities to promote ethnic pride and cultural belonging. Unlike the Chicano muralismo movement in other American states, which often relied on an anti-European political message, Chicano murals in St. Paul focused on celebrating cultural traditions. Murals became cultural billboards for the local Mexican American community. Pioneering Chicano artists like Armando Estrella organized a mural program funded by Community Programs in the Arts and Sciences (COMPAS) to cover graffiti that represented exclusionary politics. The commissioned art was displayed to the community during the El Midwest Canto al Pueblo ten-day festival in 1977.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, local murals evolved from an exclusive narrative of Chicano ethnic pride to a more inclusive one. While the area remained an immigrant neighborhood well into the 2000s, it supported a growing population of Puerto Ricans and Cubans as well as [other immigrant groups from Latin America, Africa, and Asia](#). The first non-Chicano-style mural painted in St. Paul's West Side was "Hunger Has No Color" (1985). Commissioned by the West Side Food Bank and painted by artists (John Acosta, Richard Schletty and Armando Gutierrez) from different ethnicities, the mural brought attention to the worldwide struggle against poverty and showcased the power of diversity.

By the late 1990s, Riverview Economic Development Association (REDA), a non-profit association that supported West Side businesses, coined the name "District Del Sol" for the growing commercial center around Concord Street (now Cesar Chavez Street). REDA sponsored beautification projects not only to attract urban tourism but to commercialize the barrio's marketplace. Some of their initiatives focused on pairing local youth organizations, like Teens Networking Together (TNT), with local artists to restore former murals. Unfortunately, not all murals were successfully restored. Acosta estimates the average lifespan of an outdoor mural to be no longer than ten years.

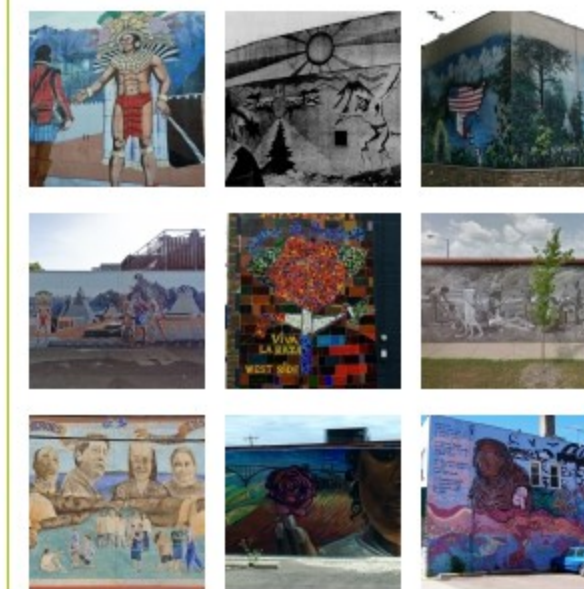
In the twenty-first century, murals continue to brighten the streets of St. Paul. In 2021, [Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio \(CLUES\)](#) commissioned Juan Chawuk, an international artist and Indigenous Maya Tojobal from Chiapas, Mexico, to paint a mural for the organization's fortieth anniversary inside their St. Paul headquarters.

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### Turning Point

During the mid-1980s and early 1990s, public murals on the West Side begin to express racial harmony by representing multiculturalism as a strength. As the city attracts larger numbers of immigrants from other countries, especially from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, the murals reflect the demographic changes. Mural-making projects begin to include artist commissions and beatification projects sponsored by the Riverview Economic Development Association (REDA).

### Chronology

- 1960s** Chicano muralismo begins across the United States alongside the Chicano movement.
- 1969** Gabriel Romo and Jose Estrada paint the first Chicano-style mural in St. Paul in the interior of the Guadalupe Area Project building. The mural includes a series of Aztec deities.
- 1974** Community Programs in the Arts and Sciences (COMPAS) is officially incorporated. (It merged with United Arts in 1988.)
- 1978** Paul Basques paints a mural titled "Cuahtémoc," depicting the Aztec emperor who defied Spanish conquistadors.
- 1979** Basques paints "Midwest Canto al Pueblo" outside the Concord Drug Store at 176 Concord Street.
- 1980–1983** John Acosta, Carlos Menchaca, and Frank Sanchez work with store owner Roger Morgan to paint "Aztec City" on an exterior wall of Morgan's Mexican & Lebanese Foods on South Robert Street.
- mid-1980s** Murals depart from traditional Mexican subject matter to reflect the growing multicultural communities migrating to St. Paul's West Side.
- 1985** Richard Schletty, John Acosta and Armando Gutierrez create a monochromatic mural titled "Hunger Has No Color" on the side of Captain Ken's Food for the St. Paul Harvest Food Bank to



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celebrate the strength of diversity.

- 1994 John Acosta repaints Basques's "Midwest Canto al Pueblo" and "Cauhtémoc."
- 1995 A neighborhood youth group called Teens Working Together (TNT) partners with artist Craig David to honor local and national civil rights leaders with a mural titled "The Heroes of Freedom, Justice and Peace" on El Burrito Mercado restaurant.
- 1997 Jimmy Longoria paints "La Llorona" at Chicago and Franklin avenues in Minneapolis. He bases it on the Mexican folktale La Llorona (the crying woman) to communicate the suffering of teen mothers in the community.
- 1999 Riverview Economic Development Association (REDA) coins the name "District Del Sol" for the commercial center around Concord Street (later renamed Cesar Chavez Street).
- 2010 Paul Basques and Greta McLain transform "Midwest Canto al Pueblo" into a mosaic.
- 2021 CLUES (Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio) commissions Juan Chawuk to paint a mural titled "Al Ritmo de la Migración del Universo" to celebrate the organization's fortieth anniversary.
- 2017 On November 23, the Minnesota Bar Association hosts a presentation by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. Jimmy Longoria's artwork decorates the venue.
- 2021 Around forty pieces debut in August during Muralismo Minnesotano, a CLUES exhibition emphasizing the origins of muralismo in Latino culture.