

# Wall of Expression

Murals are one of the oldest forms of art, and Indonesia has one of the earliest known examples. In the karst caves of Sulawesi a painting of a babirusa or “deer-pig” was found to be at least 30,000 years old, dating it as one of the oldest forms of figurative work of art in the world. The discovery of these cave paintings rewrites the history of art, raising the possibility that such art predates the exodus of modern humans from Africa 60,000 or more years ago.

## As time progressed, the modern

man perfected art murals, creating legendary masterpieces. The most iconic examples are Da Vinci’s “The Last Supper” which still adorns the walls of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan and Michaelangelo’s ceiling frescoes in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican, Rome.

In the 20th century, murals adopted more diverse iterations. In the 1920s, muralism flourished during the Mexican revolution. The earliest form of “graffiti art” murals highlighted political issues as the main concept to unite the country. The murals symbolized the most widespread form of expression due to their size and meaning of solidarity, freedom and hope. This fervent form even moved to the USA shores when the renowned Mexican painter and muralist, Diego Rivera famously painted a communist themed mural for the



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Rockefeller building titled ‘Man at The Crossroads’ and to Rockefeller’s horror, included an image of Lenin and a Soviet Russia May Day Parade. Within the year, Rockefeller removed the mural and destroyed it. Fortunately, Rivera had asked an assistant, Lucienne Bloch, to take photographs of the mural, fearing that it would be destroyed. Using them as a reference, Rivera repainted the mural, though at a smaller scale, at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City where it was renamed “Man, Controller of the Universe”.

Today, murals are less common, having moved to the medium of advertisements and not fine art. Murals or graffiti art usually has a coarse, quick aspect to it, and not a painterly method like Rivera and Da Vinci. Basquiat was the one artist who managed to turn graffiti art into fine art. Starting in the 1980’s tagging buildings in New York as a young man, Basquiat was discovered by Henry Geldzahler, who was Mayor Koch’s

Commissioner of Cultural Affairs who had an eye for “transgression art” and moved from murals to paintings. His recent painting “Untitled” from 1982 sold at Christies for a record \$57.3 million.

Following in Basquiat’s footsteps artists like Banksy in the UK and Retna in Los Angeles are still practicing street art and art in public spaces. Banksy has gained his notoriety through a range of urban interventions, from modifying street signs in Britain and printing his own currency to illegally hanging his own works in institutions such as the Louvre and the Museum of Modern Art. Most often using spray paint and stencils, Banksy has crafted a signature, immediately identifiable graphic style—and a recurring cast of police, soldiers, children, and celebrities—through which he critiques the contemporary issues of consumerism, political authority, terrorism, and the status of art and its display. Similarly, Retna started out as a street artist in Los Angeles, developing

- 01 Retna’s mural at the West Hollywood Library
- 02 Leonardo Da Vinci’s Last Supper at Santa Maria Dell Grazie in Milan

his signature style of calligraphic art, intricate lines, and complex layering. Indonesian artist Sinta Tantra, who lives and works in Britain, is well regarded for her site-specific installations. Sinta was sponsored by the Canary Wharf Group to produce a large scale painting on the DLR bridge over the Canary Wharf for the 2012 London Olympics. This mural was inspired by the 24-hour time lapse sequence of the sunset and sunrise over the top of the bridge. Her works, colorful and geometric, compliments the architectural value of the space she paints on. Government policy encourages



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- 03 Sinta Tantra's Universe of Object in Archive, Arsenic and Railings (2010)
- 04 Banksy's mural at his exhibition Dismaland in 2015
- 05 Recreation of Diego Rivera's original mural for Rockefeller "Man at The Crossroads"
- 06 Sinta Tantra's commissioned artwork A Beautiful Sunset Mistaken for Dawn on the Canary Wharf bridge for the 2012 London Olympics



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developers as well as local councils to create public artworks that engage the wider community as well as giving artists another platform to experiment.

In Jakarta, we have a few iconic murals which identify the space to which they belong. Eko Nugroho whose signature comical cartoon figures decorate the interiors in Potato Head restaurant in Pacific Place is probably the most recognizable contemporary artist in public spaces. The opening of Artotel Sarinah also unveiled a mural on the exterior walls of the hotel by Darbotz, a younger generation graffiti artist. In the restaurant area in the Artotel, Eddie Hara's colorful cartoon characters garner the ceilings and the walls.

The use of murals brings a different dimension to a space, as it becomes the focal point of discussion for art. However, logistically, its not mobile, so you can't recover the investment should taste's change, which is perhaps why we don't see many examples. But it opens the realm of art in public spaces and perhaps with corporate patronage we could see more. Murals can add a unique dimension when decorating a space, so it should be considered as being part of your design. <sup>10</sup>



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