Painted History

A LOOK AT SOME RECENT MINNESOTA MURALS

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When a town reaches the century mark, it is time to celebrate and remember. Many Minnesota communities honor their survival and longevity with parades and plaques, while others publish histories. Increasingly in recent years, though, towns have celebrated by painting walls. For tourists, visi-

tors, or residents, these historical outdoor murals provide an informed guide to what citizens consider important. Since 1987, when my book Museum of the Streets—Minnesota's Contemporary Outdoor Murals was published, I have noted more than sixty additional murals, most of them new. More than half of these depict local history.

These celebratory artworks share some elements with the indoor murals that have a long history in Minnesota. The best-known examples are those completed for the state capitol in 1905 and the public-works murals of the 1930s. During the Great Depression, hospitals, schools, the Minneapolis Armory, Fort Snelling, and more than a dozen post offices throughout the state became the galleries for these wall-sized works of art. Like the later outdoor murals, these often portrayed local history or occupations such as logging, mining, rock quarrying, and farming. Some of the New Deal-sponsored murals can still be seen in their original locations (like Richard Haines's corridor-long painting in the Sebeka High School), while others have been destroyed or restored for exhibition elsewhere.¹

In addition to these projects undertaken for public institutions, churches, corporations, clubs, theaters, and restaurants have also commissioned indoor murals. These generally feature allegories, topical imagery, and relevant historical themes. While most outdoor murals are painted directly on a wall or bonded to its surface in the fresco technique, indoor murals may be painted on canvas or wood shaped to fit the space.

The artist selected to design a local mural often works from historic photographs either supplied by citizens, published in town centennial histories, or discovered in historical society collections. Such photographs are seldom copied exactly but serve as source material for the final composition. Collecting these images for a muralist can even be a class assignment. Erik Bud's students at Fosston High School, for example, researched their community's visual history. The results can be seen in St. Paul artist Ta-Coumba

OVERLEAF: The Annandale Chamber of Commerce commissioned Ta-Coumba Aiken and Marilyn Lindstrom to design murals for the Centra Sota grain elevator. Aiken painted historic scenes on the elevator itself, while Lindstrom depicted contemporary themes on the long storage building. This detail of her work stresses Annandale's importance as a railroad and agricultural center and celebrates the town's popular Fourth of July festivities. The title, "Progress, Kindness, and Peace," comes from a poem by an Annandale woman, lettered on a scroll elsewhere in the painting.

New Prague's history dates to the arrival of Anton Philipp in 1856. His portrait is one of eight murals painted on walls near Main Street by Gary Butzer of Morton. These murals, like similar projects in Lompoc, California, Toppenish, Washington, and Chemainus, British Columbia, have become a source of community pride as well as a tourist attraction.

The first mural painted on New Prague's walls of history was based on a 1906 photograph of the town's Bohemian Brass Band. Artists Kevin Sirek and Steve Nelson depicted the uniformed members standing in front of old downtown buildings. Assistant mural painters often sign their work along its lower "frame," but here the carefully lettered names are those of the musicians.
When Heron Lake celebrated its centennial in 1983, townspeople were able to watch scenes and landmarks—past and present—come to life on the wall of the Tri-County News office. Jim Cambron, a South Dakota artist, researched, designed, and painted the mural. Visitors to Heron Lake can study the results and read about them on a plaque located in the adjacent park.

Decorah, Iowa, artist Carl Homstad's 1990 mural for Houston gathers together a number of significant commercial buildings. The barber shop, general store, newspaper office, movie theater, and grain elevator (painted around the door) provide an instant architectural tour of this southern Minnesota town.
Good Thunder was the name of two Indian leaders, one Dakota and the other Winnebago. On the grain elevator in the town named after both men is one of the state’s tallest murals. High on the structure, Ta-Coumba Aiken painted the Dakota man’s portrait. Below Good Thunder’s hand is a Winnebago village. Also visible in this view are the Graham House (destroyed many years ago) and a “tractorcade” that was part of a national farm protest in the 1970s. Good Thunder’s mural, painted during the summers of 1987 and 1988, covers the elevator, a shed, and several adjoining bins. The mural project was intended to promote the town as a rural arts center. Widespread state and even national publicity has brought tourists to see it ever since.

Visitors seeking Springfield’s townscape mural must turn off the main street, as the work covers the rear walls of downtown stores. Artist Dave Gross included a locomotive, a horse-drawn buggy, pedestrians, and a dog in addition to the store fronts and people shown in this detail.
Spring Grove’s murals follow the theme of agriculture and the four seasons. Carl Homstad used old photographs and a 1904 postcard as inspiration for his scenes of harvesting, plowing, the woods in winter, and town buildings. Elsewhere in Spring Grove, he depicted veterinarian James Gray’s patients on Gray’s barn. Homstad has also painted history murals in Calmar and Decorah, Iowa, Houston, Minnesota, and LaCrosse, Wisconsin.

The National Paint and Coatings Association gave Frank Gosiak’s Little Falls murals its highest award for “visual impact” in 1991. Gosiak, assisted by many volunteers, painted a 1920s street scene for the north side of the Hennepin Paper Company warehouse. Facing the river, on the warehouse’s east wall, is this logging scene from the 1890s. Gosiak used photographs from the Morrison County Historical Society to suggest period details.
example, either face the major downtown thoroughfare or can be seen nearby. Springfield’s towncape mural covers the rear walls of several main-street buildings and is even functional—drive-in patrons stop at the actual teller’s window in the bank’s painted back wall. Minneiska’s mural committee chose a retaining wall along Highway 61; Good Thunder and Annandale picked their tallest structures: muralists Ta-Coumba Aiken and Marilyn Lindstrom had to design for and paint on the irregular surfaces of grain elevators.

Support for creating a mural ranges from local, sometimes in-kind contributions to grants awarded through the regional councils of the Minnesota State Arts Board, to the Picture It Painted program of Minnesota Beautiful, a division of the Department of Trade and Economic Development. In 1990 the statewide Celebrate Minnesota program presented matching grants to mural committees in the towns of Houston, Alden, and Milaca. State arts board grants helped support efforts in Erskine, Foston, McIntosh, and Olivia.

As historian John Bodnar pointed out in his recent book, Remaking America, commemorative efforts may reflect either an official viewpoint or a “vernacular cultural expression.” An official approach for a community celebration might emphasize political leaders or town founders, while a vernacular commemoration would focus on ordinary people from the past. Town murals have their share of both: founders, such as New Prague’s Anton Philipp and McIntosh’s A. J. McIntosh, and ordinary people, such as the pioneers in Heron Lake and the farmers in Spring Grove. Occasionally the subject depicted is a celebrity. Judy Garland poses cheerfully as Dorothy, her famous role in The Wizard of Oz, in Grand Rapids’ centennial mural. In An Atlas of the Difficult World, poet Adrienne Rich wrote that murals can become maps of the country, the content depending on the artist’s viewpoint: “Where do we see it from is the question.” These Minnesota murals see history from a decidedly local viewpoint, and that is just what makes them interesting.

Other elements commonly found in murals are flora and fauna, buildings, and events—such as Annandale’s Fourth of July parade or Mora’s Vasaloppet ski race. Windom’s centennial mural and a Celebrate Minnesota work completed for Houston use architecture to represent each community, as views of local buildings grace the walls.

Few town history murals in Minnesota arouse controversy or anger of the kind that led protesters to hurl pots of paint at Austin’s mural by Local P-9, United Food and Concession Workers, during the strike against Hormel in 1986. The events depicted are seldom so recent and raw. Yet in Northfield a mural became the subject for heated debate during most of the summer of 1992. The issue, ironically, was history—in the form of historic preservation.

Longtime Northfield resident Dr. S. T. Kucera commissioned a mural on the city’s medical history, to be painted by Gary Butzer on the north and west walls of the Medical Arts Building at Second and Division streets. This building, which Kucera had constructed in 1948, stands adjacent to the Northfield Historic District. The city’s Historic Preservation Commission did not want a mural near that district, so members voted to reject the artwork as “inappropriate,” sending their recommendation to the city council. The council later rejected an appeal, accompanied by a petition signed by about 450 residents. Northfield, however, had not properly established the buildings adjacent to the historic district as a fringe area with various restrictions. Thus, neither the Historic Preservation Commission nor the city council could forbid the painting on historic preservation grounds. It was completed and dedicated in late September 1992.

Painted pages of Minnesota history can be seen throughout the state, in small towns as well as in metropolitan centers. Much like giant outdoor statues, murals have become a popular art form, a vital component in creating our sense of place. As Ann Derby of the Little Falls Main Street committee said, “They’re history, they’re heritage, and the community loves them.” For the most part, this is true.

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