

Intersections of art, culture and social justice

Since 1995, Hector H. Hernandez has produced murals and other artworks throughout communities and educational institutions in Oregon . He founded Art and Culture Services to design and implement mural activities and cultural programs.

Permanent exhibition murals are located at the OSU Memorial Union, Portland Community College (Rock Creek Campus), Independence High School, Newberg and Canby school districts, Parks and Recreations and Family Bridges in Hillsboro among others. Currently Hernandez is working on a community mural project for the [Cipriano Ferrel Education Center](#) in Woodburn and this year he completed another mural project in Colonia Libertad in Salem Oregon.

He has studied art in Japan and worked as an illustrator. He has showed his works in numerous galleries across Oregon, Japan and Mexico. He received his MFA from the University of Oregon in 1999 in painting and holds an MIS in Art and Education, a degree in Anthropology.

In a Q&A with *Colors of Influence*, he discusses the major themes of his work, process, and fascination with the intersection of culture and art.



What is your vision and mission for Arts and Culture Services? It started as an initiative to respond to needs of the community in terms of the cultural needs, and bring up a proposal that speaks to many people of different cultures.

I have worked with nonprofits in developing health education materials. My work in developing murals allows me to develop works that reflect cultural and diversity issues in communities and the workplace. My background in anthropology helps me tackle those issues, as well as my background in technology. I also teach courses on ethnic studies, make presentations on art culture and the history of Mexico.

Why is your work important? Education is crucial. A well-educated workforce and population yield a more productive and positive quality of life. If you have a population that is better educated about issues, they are likely to come up with better solutions to problems.

Art is an important aspect in education. It is a powerful vehicle for processes of social change and changing attitudes about issues, such as diversity, ecology, and environmentalism. Art reflects the conditions, attitudes, and responses of people to social change. If you create a work that captures these issues, you create art that addresses life in a positive way.



Labor y Libertad. 2005 Labor & Freedom. 26' x 32 Acrylic on Wall

Community mural for Farm worker Housing Development Corporation, Lancaster Dr SE. and Kuebler Blvd, Salem Oregon.

Who are your major influences? The Mexican muralists and Impressionist painters. I was exposed to art at very early age. I studied at the National Normal School in Mexico City. Our open air theater had a huge mural of Orozco, one of the three top mural painters in Mexico.

I finished my studies in anthropology, because I thought art was not my forte, but at the same time I was working in my first pay art job painting a mural at my university. Then had an opportunity to go to National School of Fine Arts in Mexico City.

In college I studied under Arnold Belkin, one of the disciples of Siqueiros. I learned very important aspects of community murals. Community murals brought the process closer to the people, whereas traditional mural painters painted under the auspices of the state or church. A mural painting is not simply a large-scale easel painting. It's not a billboard.

An example of traditional murals is the Sistine chapel. Michelangelo painted the walls to illustrate the Bible. The temples in Egypt and in MesoAmerica are all examples of murals. They were completed under the patronage state or church and addressing subjects dictated by those institutions.

Contemporary murals come from initiatives of citizens in society. These initiatives could be funded by public money, but independence of artist is the crucial element, along with independence of the communities trying to express themselves. It's not only the state that is dictating what kinds of images should be there.

In the university community, I started becoming involved in discussion about murals and public art. A public art piece is always an easy target – there's always an element of controversy. It was during those days that I started learning strategies to develop dialog and outreach into the community.

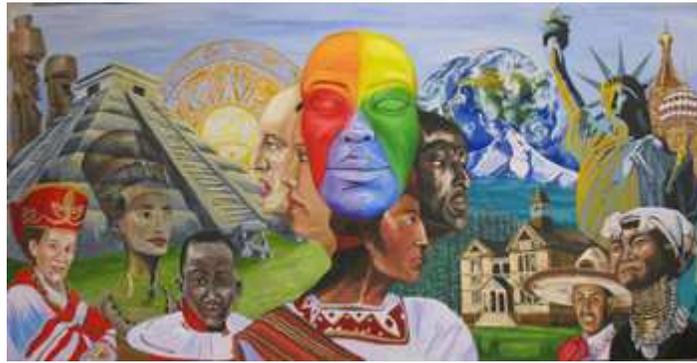
In your work, how does anthropology and art intersect? I started studying anthropology when I went to Japan. Finished my licenciatura in Mexico City, equivalent to baccalaureate. I started studying the ancient arts of Japan and

Buddhist art. I was interested in seeing how different art forms reflect the culture and the formation Japan's identity in the ancient times, especially with their relationship with China and neighboring Korea.

In my current work, the intersection comes along with crucial element of culture. Anthropology deals with issues of culture, and art is one manifestation of culture. Art not only is a cultural byproduct but also influence other aspects of culture and society. I realized that I have the talent to express myself through images and therefore I have the opportunity to bring up my interpretation of those social and cultural issues. .

In mural painting, I can develop a narrative that addresses social issues. The narrative is expressed through an aesthetic strategy that shows visual solutions to problems.

Murals are not merely illustrations. Otherwise, you'll have graphic art or posters. Mural painting involves different aesthetic strategies, combinations of colors and shapes. In many cases, they even reaching levels of abstraction and exploring different alternatives to figurative art, and by doing that they interpret the social reality in a different way.



Multiple faces of World Culture 2006-07. 15' x 7' Acrylic on Canvas

Woodburn Arts and Communication Academy project. Woodburn High School, Marion County Woodburn, Oregon.

What process do you take in approaching a community mural project? Organizations contact me to begin work on a mural. When discussions start, I not only involve the leaders, but also make the effort to have a dialog with members of the community. I work with members of the community to grab their impressions and get a sense of elements or images that they would like to see. In this process, some people bring images they identify with: photographs, illustrations, drawings.

At end of each project, how do you measure success? When I see the faces of the people that live or work in the community where the mural is located. I see myself as an engineer of culture. I take different elements from the community, from the people and put it all together to create a product. I don't compromise my position as an artist, but I also don't want to reflect anything that I don't agree with either. For me, the most crucial issues are social justice and human rights. As long as those issues are respected or addressed properly in the mural, then all is fine.



Musicians' Union Mural 2006. Acrylic on Wall 17' x 88'

Collaborative Art project with Isaka Shamshud-Din, Joe Cotter, and Baba Wage. Author's section 17'x 22' 325 NE 20th St Portland, Oregon.

What is the significance of murals in Mexican artistic expression? I consider murals as the most important contribution of Mexico to the world in terms of modern art. Before that, we had official murals or large-scale paintings.

After the Mexican revolution, social upheaval brought the destruction of institutions, and the need to build new institutions. In that process, mural painting became crucial because it was a way to illustrate the goals, mission and vision of new revolutionary gov't. It was crucial for this movement to differentiate itself from the art forms such as mural painting from Europe.

There was a whole renewal of the arts taking place in Mexico during the '30s, '40s and '50s. Mural paintings were commissioned by the government, but those artists were actively working with the communities. They were engaged in exploring and experimenting with materials and techniques, and integration into architecture and sculpture.

What were the best takeaways from the Mural Painting Encounter you attended at Mexico City in 2006? I was impressed to meet a lot of people who are doing the same work I'm doing and speaking the same language. I met an artist from France who is organizing groups of Jewish people and Palestinians to paint a mural together in Israel.

That was great, because that is also what we're trying to do here, to work with different communities. If we can bring a group of youth working together on a project, we will be able to start a dialogue between the groups. It was amazing to see so many people from all over – from Australia, Argentina, Ireland, South Africa, and the United States. In Ireland, for example, they're experimenting with strategies to work with public art and mural painting with stencils and spray paint – very innovative.

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