Chicano Art & Artists

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*The Great Wall of Los Angeles* is the world's longest mural. Often referred to simply as *The Great Wall*, this public mural was begun in 1976 and stretches for a half mile across Los Angeles. The mural's coordinator, Judy Baca, is known for revolutionizing the methods and implications of public art with *The Great Wall*. Created with the help of more than 400 local urban youths, the mural depicts the multicultural history of California from prehistory to the present.

*The Great Wall* is located in the Tujunga Flood Control Channel of the San Fernando Valley, part of the drainage system of Los Angeles County. The impetus for the project began in 1974 when the Army Corps of Engineers asked Baca to create a mural on the concrete walls of the Tujunga Wash as part of a community beautification project. After working for two years to get city support for the project, Baca began working with local volunteers to paint the mural in 1976. Baca developed an innovative working method for this mural project, as she collaborated with various community groups and organizations. Initially, Baca worked with a group of local artists, historians, and youths to paint the first section of the mural. In subsequent years, Baca collaborated with hundreds more local young people, making the mural as much about the process of constructing it as the subject matter it depicts. Baca wanted the mural to be something the neighborhood could take pride in, while at the same time giving work experience to youths in a neighborhood that was troubled by high unemployment rates.

Working in the tradition of Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, Baca used *The Great Wall* to challenge society and forge a new class consciousness among the local Mexican American population. The mural depicts scenes in California history from the viewpoint of various local ethnic groups, beginning in prehistoric times and continuing through the 1950s. Baca wanted this mural to visualize a history that is often excluded from official accounts, and in this way it functions as an important part of the Chicano movement of the 1970s. Painted in acrylics on the cast concrete walls of the flood canal, the mural depicts such historical events as the Spanish conquest, the demolition of the Chavez Ravine barrio to build Dodger Stadium, and women's suffrage, among others.

In 2013, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* measured 2,435 feet long and 13 feet high, but the project is still ongoing. In 1976, Baca helped found the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) to coordinate *The Great Wall* and she has been working with this public arts center since that time to continue the project. Restoration on the mural began in 2002, and in 2013 SPARC received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to extend the mural. Baca has since been working with SPARC to design the remaining four decades of the 20th century (1960s–1990s).

Lauren Gallow

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Don Tosti

Musician, composer, and band leader Don Tosti is best known for his work creating the Latin "pachuco" sound of the 1940s zoot suit culture. Tosti pioneered a new blend of jazz, boogie, and blues to create this sound which is typified by his groundbreaking single "Pachuco Boogie" (1948). This single, recorded with drummer Raul Diaz, saxophonist Bob Hernandez, and pianist Eddie Cano, was the first million-selling Latin song. Tosti along with Lalo Guerrero pioneered the sub-genre of post-war Mexican American jump blues and laid the foundation for the evolution of Chicano rock music. Tosti's "pachuco" sound infused post-WWII big-band boogie woogie with a distinct Latino style.

Born on March 27, 1923 in El Paso, Texas, Don Tosti's given name was Edmundo Martínez Tostado. Tosti grew up in the Segundo Barrio in El Paso, a neighborhood with a notoriously tough reputation. Opportunities in public music programs and evidence of early musical talent helped Tosti rise above his humble beginnings, and by age nine he was playing second violin in the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. After moving to Los Angeles with his family when he was 15, Tosti took saxophone and acoustic bass lessons, both of which he mastered quickly. While attending Roosevelt High School, Tosti was the concertmaster for the All-City High School Orchestra, and he soon formed his own swing band. When he was 19 he began studying jazz under the German bassist Arthur Pabst, and it was at this time that he took the stage name Don Tosti when he realized he was missing out on paying gigs because of his Latino ethnicity. In 1943 while studying accounting at LA City College and playing with the school's jazz band, his talents on the string bass landed Tosti a job playing with Jack Teagarden's orchestra in New York City. He continued to work as a jazz player with such prominent musicians as Les Brown, Jimmy Dorsey, Bobby Sherwood, and Charlie Barnett. Tosti was one of only a few Mexican American musicians to play professionally at the height of the big-band era following World War II.

Throughout the 1940s Tosti built his reputation as a talented jazz musician by playing in clubs across Los Angeles. Eventually, Tosti began composing his own music and formed his own band with pianist Eddie Cano, saxophonist Bob Hernandez, and drummer Raul Diaz. Tosti and his quartet gained popularity when they began performing in El Sombrero, a club located on Main and 15th streets in central Los Angeles that opened in 1945. It was here that the Don Tosti Quartet (later called the Pachuco Boogie Boys) began experimenting with the "pachuco" sound, an attempt on the part of Tosti to explore Latino traditions in his music. In 1948, when the group recorded the single "Pachuco Boogie," the group became quite well known locally in Los Angeles. "Pachuco" refers broadly to Mexican American street culture, and more specifically to a subculture within this tradition associated with the zoot suit and the idea of making showy public appearances. The origin of the term "pachuco" is often connected to the city of El Paso—Tosti's hometown. Tosti drew on the music favored by the pachuco subculture for his "Pachuco Boogie," combining elements of jazz, swing, and jump blues with Latin rhythms and Mexican American street culture. A smashing success, "Pachuco Boogie" fused Tosti's frenetic Chicano rap with piano and jump blues beats. With this single, Tosti is credited with opening a new chapter in American music, along with his other jump tune compositions such as his experimentation with "Chicano Boogie." Through his contributions to post-World War II Mexican American jump blues, Tosti inspired an emerging Mexican American youth culture inspired by the Zoot Suit scene, as well as influenced future generations of Chicano rock musicians.
Into the 1950s, following the success of "Pachuco Boogie," Tosti enjoyed growing fame as he worked as a bandleader and orchestra leader, making many recordings and even headlining the Hollywood Palladium. He was even given his own television show during this time called "Momentos Alegres" ("Happy Moments") on KHJ-TV Channel 9 in Los Angeles. This television show allowed Tosti to reach a wider audience and influence a new generation of musical players. Later in his life, Tosti took his musical creations to a new level by creating compositions and arrangements for various leaders in the entertainment field. Tosti wrote music and arrangements for such musicians as Hoagy Carmichael and Lalo Guerrero, a musician known as "the father of Chicano music." He is credited with influencing a generation of Chicano musicians, and many musical greats such as Eddie Cano and Manny Lopez cite him as an important inspiration.

In 1963 Tosti married model and actress Ruth Lila Margulies, and the pair eventually settled in Palm Springs, California. During this phase of his life, Tosti became a society musician, working as orchestra leader at the Palm Springs Biltmore Hotel and Canyon Hotel. He regularly played piano at local events and was a highly valued session musician. Tosti eventually opened and operated his own music agency called Music by Tosti, and he regularly gave music lessons in voice, bass, piano, and guitar. In 1999 Tosti was awarded a star on the Palm Springs Walk of the Stars, and in 2002 Arhoolie Productions released a new compilation of his musical works. Tosti died in Palm Springs on August 2, 2004 at the age of 81 following a battle with prostate cancer.

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Esteban Villa

Chicano artist and activist Esteban Villa is known for his work with the Chicano community primarily in Sacramento, California. He is widely celebrated for his public mural paintings, but is also a printmaker, art educator, and community activist. Villa's interest in combining art and activism is most evident in his work with the Sacramento-based Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF), an artist collective of which he is a founding member.

Villa was born August 3, 1930, in Tulare, California. As a young adult, he spent time working in the agricultural fields of California—an experience which likely informed his later work as an activist in the Chicano Movement. He showed an interest in art at a very young age and benefited from his early teachers encouraging him to keep painting and drawing. Villa studied art at California College of the Arts (CCA) in Oakland, California, and left the school after only one year. He returned, however, in 1958 and was awarded his bachelor's degree from CCA in 1961.

While at CCA, Villa met fellow Chicano artist José Montoya, who was also an art student there at the time. Both Villa and Montoya were frustrated with the art curriculum they were receiving at CCA and its almost exclusive focus on European artists, as it left out such narratives as the history of Mexican art. They were also dissatisfied with the lack of activism in their art school curriculum, their teachers emphasizing the formal qualities of art over its political possibilities. Villa and Montoya thus looked to the history of Mexican mural paintings for inspiration, studying such muralists as Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco. In the work of these artists they found a public art that could also serve as a form of activism. Inspired by these artists, in 1965 Villa and Montoya founded the Mexican American Liberation Art Front (MALA-F), a short-lived art group based in the Bay Area. MALA-F encouraged its members to reject western European artistic standards and instead explore the new ethno-racial consciousness emerging from the Chicano movement during that time.

After graduating from CCA, Villa moved to Sacramento and began a long career as an art instructor. Initially teaching art at the high school level, Villa soon became a professor at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) and also lectured at other universities in California and beyond. His good friend José Montoya had also moved to Sacramento by this time and Montoya was soon hired by CSUS to teach art as well. Villa and Montoya continued their commitment to art as activism, becoming involved in local community art education in Sacramento at the Washington Neighborhood Center. Villa and Montoya soon met other like-minded artists, including some of their CSUS students, and decided to form a new collective. Montoya and Villa along with fellow Chicano artists Ricardo Favela, Juani Orosco, Rudy Cuellar, and Louie "The Foot" González formed the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF; originally, Rebel Chicano Art Front) in 1969. A fluid organization with a broad membership of artists and activists, the RCAF sought to engage communities through artistic, cultural, and educational programs in an effort to express Chicano cultural history and identity. Villa and the RCAF were heavily involved with the emerging Chicano movement of the 1970s, which advocated for better social and political rights for Mexican Americans.

In fact, Villa is acknowledged by historians as one of the seminal artists of the Chicano movement. While associated with the RCAF, between 1969 and 1999, Villa worked on dozens of public murals, mostly in the
Sacramento area. His murals continued his attempt to combine art and activism and use art as a form of consciousness-raising, as most deal with some aspect of Chicano/Mexicano culture. One of Villa's most infamous mural projects is called *Metamorphosis* and was completed with the help of a crew of RCAF artists including Juanishi Orosco and Stan Padilla. *Metamorphosis* began in 1978 when Villa created an impromptu mural on the old walls of a pedestrian walkway in downtown Sacramento. The area had once been part of the barrio neighborhood, but redevelopment projects had completely transformed this space. Villa created the initial murals as a form of protest against this change, but police quickly stopped him since he did not have permission to paint on the walkway walls. In 1979, Villa joined with the RCAF artists to begin on *Metamorphosis*, a sanctioned mural located on the side of a parking structure in the K Street Mall in downtown Sacramento. *Metamorphosis* is 65 feet long and four stories high and contains the Mesoamerican imagery found in most RCAF murals. The central image of a butterfly relates to the title, as the mural is a statement about the artist's ability to transform cold, anonymous architectural façades into something more humanistic with a connection to nature and the past. The mural also aligned with the RCAF's participation in the Chicano movement, as it served as a public call for greater recognition and respect for Mexican American citizens.

Besides his mural paintings, Villa is also known for his work as a printmaker, easel painter, watercolorist, and musician. His work is often referred to as surrealist, as he sometimes includes visual references to such things as the flying jalapeño, tortilla art, and the flying burrito brothers. Villa has also referred to his art as "Chicano pop art," as he substitutes food like the jalapeño for the apple pie or Campbell's Soup found in pop depictions of food by artists like Andy Warhol and Wayne Thiebaud. Villa's work is frequently shown in galleries and museums in the Sacramento area, but he has also exhibited across California and Nevada. Along with his work as an educator, Villa has also served as an art consultant to many schools and organizations in California and has done art programs in the prison system. Villa is currently professor emeritus at CSUS and can be found occasionally performing as a singer and guitarist in the Sacramento area.

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**Further Reading**


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Juan R. Fuentes: *Fidel* (1973)

*Fidel* is a silkscreen print by Chicano artist Juan R. Fuentes. Originally designed in 1970, Fuentes reprinted the image in poster form for several years through 1973. The print depicts Cuban leader Fidel Castro pictured from a low vantage point while standing at a microphone. *Fidel*, like many of Fuentes's prints from the 1970s, participates in the emerging Chicano movement by representing an international event in the struggle for social justice.

Approximately 23 by 29 inches in size, *Fidel* was printed in a series of 26 silkscreen prints. Like many of Fuentes's silkscreen prints, *Fidel* exhibits the artist's signature stylistic qualities of simplified forms and areas of flat, unshaded blocks of bright color. The print features Castro, who is pictured from the waist up against a bright blue background wearing a straw hat, red shirt, and green jacket. Fuentes uses strong blocks of color in this print to draw attention to the main figure of Castro who dominates the composition. Fuentes produced this and many of his other posters from the early 1970s using a silkscreening process, which is a printing technique that uses stencils to apply ink to a surface. Because silkscreen printing allows for quick reproduction of images, Fuentes produced multiple copies of *Fidel*.

Like other artists of the early Chicano poster movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Fuentes used his *Fidel* print to engage with sociopolitical issues of the Chicano movement. Artists of the Chicano movement who were fighting against Mexican American oppression and discrimination were often inspired by international struggles towards social liberation. *Fidel* takes as its subject the Cuban leader, who in this image comes to represent the Latin American liberation movements developing in Cuba during the 1970s. Fuentes pictures Castro in this image in an attempt to link the revolutionary movements of Cuba to the Chicano struggles in his local community in the Bay Area of California. Fuentes and other Bay Area Chicano poster artists were inspired not only by the political activism in Cuba during this time, but also by the posters being produced there by artists such as René Mederos. Fuentes likely saw these Cuban posters in Bay Area exhibitions on Cuban art held during the early 1970s, as well as in books such as *The Art of Revolution: Castro's Cuba, 1959-1970* (1970). Fuentes even helped organize an exhibition of Cuban poster art at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco in 1974.

Fuentes likely produced and printed *Fidel* during his association with La Raza Graphic Center of San Francisco in the early 1970s. This organization was established by Latinos and Chicanos with the goal of using art to generate community-building and activism. Like other artists associated with the Center, Fuentes used such prints as *Fidel* to advance social justice in the Chicano community by linking it to international struggles for liberation such as that in Cuba. Today, copies of Fidel in print and poster form are held in gallery and archival collections across California.

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Chicano artist Juanishi Orosco is best known for his public mural projects across the United States that treat a range of social, political, and cultural issues. Often working with community members and others to execute his murals, Orosco uses his work to engage directly with local interests and concerns. Orosco's interest in using art as a form of activism is typified by his work with the artist collective Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF), a group he helped found.

Born on February 18, 1945, in Lincoln, California, Orosco and his family soon moved to a small rural community on the outskirts of nearby Sacramento. Alongside his family, Orosco worked in the agricultural fields there until he was 20 years old. After graduating from high school in 1963 and attending community college briefly, Orosco was drafted into the army during the Vietnam War. He served three years in the army and then attended American River College in Sacramento County. Soon after, Orosco transferred to California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) where he studied art from 1970 until 1974. Orosco's experiences as a farmworker and serving in Vietnam formed a strong background for his future work as an artist/activist.

While at CSUS, Orosco was heavily involved in the activism enveloping that campus during the early 1970s. Anti-war protests and the activism generated through the emerging Chicano movement were visibly present at CSUS during this time, and this politically charged environment informed much of Orosco's work. CSUS students and faculty alike were engaging in political activism, and for his part Orosco participated in numerous protests and marches as part of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union.

Through his studies in art at CSUS, Orosco worked closely with Professors José Montoya and Esteban Villa. These two educators, along with Orosco and several other students, became heavily involved in community activism in Sacramento, focusing on art education as a means of engaging and uniting communities. Eventually, Orosco, Montoya, and Villa, along with fellow Chicano artists Ricardo Favela, Rudy Cuellar, and Louie "The Foot" González, joined together to form an artist collective they called the Rebel Chicano Art Front (RCAF). When it was founded in 1972, many mistakenly assumed the initials "RCAF" stood for "Royal Canadian Air Force," so the group decided to become the "Royal Chicano Air Force." This name reflected the group's militant stance and commitment to the political causes of the UFW but also signified the group's sense of humor. In his work with the RCAF, Orosco combined these characteristics to create works of political and social significance.

As part of the RCAF in the early 1970s, Orosco was committed to uniting art and community development. Working with other RCAF members, Orosco helped found El Centro de Artistas Chicanos ("El Centro") in 1973. This Sacramento community center also functioned as a printing workshop, and it provided a space for artists and activists alike to come together and address important community issues. Orosco was heavily involved in the arts education programming at El Centro, conducting art classes for community members ranging from preschoolers to senior citizens. Orosco was also involved during this time in a university-community art program started by Villa and Montoya called the Barrio Art Program, which continues to conduct workshops in Sacramento's working-class communities today. Today El Centro is used primarily as an artist's studio and no
longer holds art classes, but its sister organization, La Raza Galería Posada, continues to produce Chicano art exhibitions and cultural programming.

Orosco's primary work with the RCAF and El Centro has been mural painting, although he is also known as a printmaker, easel painter, and computer graphic artist. Orosco estimates he has painted more than 100 murals, many located in the Sacramento area, but most scattered across the United States. Orosco's mural work can be divided into two types: his commissioned work which he completes with a skilled team of painters, and his projects that are more community-driven in conception and execution. For his commissioned projects, Orosco's team is headed by his two sons who are also painters. One of Orosco's most well known commissioned public murals is called L.A.S.E.R.I.U.M. (1984) and is located in the K-Street Mall in downtown Sacramento. The project began in conception in 1978 when fellow RCAF member Esteban Villa created an impromptu mural on the old walls of a pedestrian walkway in downtown Sacramento. The area had once been part of the barrio neighborhood, but redevelopment projects had completely transformed the space. Villa created the initial murals as a form of protest against this change, but police quickly stopped him and removed the murals. In 1984, Villa and Orosco began work on another mural in the same location as the 1978 mural, but this time with public permission and funding. The mural, L.A.S.E.R.I.U.M. (Light Air in Sacramento with Energy Resources in Unlimited Movement), consists of sections painted on concrete combined with geometric arrangements of ceramic tile. Although Villa and Orosco were instructed to keep the mural noncontroversial and use only abstract imagery, the artists encoded many hidden images in the painting, including images of factories and trucks filled with farm workers. This mural serves as an example of Orosco's aim to use his art to reclaim public spaces for barrio residents and the larger Chicano community.

With his community-based mural projects, Orosco works with community organizations, high schools, and other arts education groups to execute his designs. Orosco is committed to involving the community in all aspects of mural production for these works, including the planning, design, and painting stages. For this reason, these projects often take much longer to complete. Orosco has been working on his mural project Capaces in Woodburn, Oregon, since the beginning of 2011. Working with local activists as part of the PCUN (Oregon's Farmworkers Union) as well as with international volunteers and organizers, Orosco has overseen the planning of this mural from start to finish. Orosco continues to work full-time on his public mural projects while also continuing his associations with the RCAF and the UFW.

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Further Reading


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Juan R. Fuentes

Chicano artist, activist, and printmaker Juan R. Fuentes has been actively producing work for more than 30 years. He is best known for his silkscreen, woodcut, and linocut prints that often treat the theme of the human condition as it relates to local and international struggles for liberation. Fuentes has dedicated himself and his work to the advancement of social justice, seeing his art as part of not just the Chicano movement, but also participating in a larger global movement for social change.

Fuentes was born in Artesia, New Mexico, on April 5, 1950. He moved to San Francisco, in 1960 and in 1969 he began his study of art at San Francisco State College. The activism and culturally turbulent landscape of the 1970s in the Bay Area formed a strong background to Fuentes's work. His drive to create a social art was largely informed by the Chicano, African American, and Native American struggles for social and political equality occurring in the 1960s and 1970s. The activism and protests of this time period that were especially prevalent in the San Francisco Bay Area were a large inspiration to Fuentes and his work.

Throughout the 1970s, Fuentes studied with artist and Chicano activist Rupert García, who is known for his forceful graphic art and paintings that deal with issues of racism and the mistreatment of Latinos in the United States. From artists like García and Malaquías Montoya, another of his mentors, Fuentes was introduced to silkscreen printing and the political poster movement developing in the Latino community in the 1970s. In his work, Fuentes was influenced by García's ability to take the Mexican tradition of artists like Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco and unify it with elements of American Pop Art such as the silkscreening method and focus on commercial art.

Fuentes's early work from the 1970s is defined by his interest in silkscreen printing and an effort to engage in community activism. This often took the form of poster art, and today Fuentes is regarded as an important member of the historical Chicano Poster Art Movement of the 1970s. This movement began in the late 1960s and is defined by its combination of the poster-making trends of the period—found with such Pop artists as Andy Warhol—with the iconography and sociopolitical issues of the Chicano Movement. The early history of Chicano Poster Art in which Fuentes participated was marked by a community-oriented attitude, as Fuentes and others sought to use their work to build communities and collectives in the process of making and distributing the posters. Initially, the Chicano Poster Art Movement was closely aligned with the Chicano political movement emerging in the 1970s, as Fuentes and other poster artists sought to use such public art forms as poster making to recapture Mexican American history and culture in order to define Chicano identity.

Fuentes's early poster work illustrates various social and humanitarian issues such as women's rights, anti-war propaganda, la raza (a term referring to Latin American ethnorracial identity), and numerous sociopolitical marches and rallies of the 1970s. Fuentes produced his posters primarily through a silkscreening process, which is a printing technique using stencils to apply ink to a surface. A design is imprinted on a mesh screen and then a squeegee-like device is used to press ink through the mesh onto the printing surface. Due to this printing method, simplified forms and areas of flat, unshaded blocks of color typically characterize Fuentes's posters. Because
silkscreen printing allows for quick reproduction of images, Fuentes was able to produce multiple copies of his posters relatively quickly. Like other artists of the Chicano Poster Art Movement, Fuentes drew on this method of print production as a means of engaging communities both through the production and distribution of the poster art.

After many years working as a poster maker, Fuentes began teaching art in the San Francisco County Jail's Arts Program. During this time, he began experimenting with other printing methods and began gravitating towards relief printing processes. In 1997 Fuentes produced his first linocut—a printmaking technique similar to woodcut. With linocuts, an image is carved onto a sheet of linoleum which acts as the relief surface. Ink is then applied to the linoleum sheet with a roller and attaches to the raised, uncarved areas. The sheet is then pressed onto paper or fabric to create an image. Fuentes' linocuts frequently feature close-up portraits of individuals with intricate graphic patterns defining their clothing and backgrounds. Fuentes has said he was heavily influenced by the social realist tradition of Latin American printmaking, drawing on the works of artists such as Jose Guadalupe Posada and Leopoldo Mendez. With his linocut works, Fuentes seeks to use the individual figure as a means to tell a story and explore the human condition. Fuentes continued to produce linocuts up to 2011, and he has also experimented with other traditional printmaking techniques including woodcut. With these works, Fuentes has focused on such humanistic themes as the bond between mother and child and the bodily process of manual labor.

While continuing to work as a printmaker and artist, Fuentes also served from 1997 to 2007 as the Executive Director of Mission Gráfica at the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts in San Francisco. After resigning from this post, Fuentes founded the printmaking studio Pajaro Editions, which participated in multiple exhibitions and artist collectives with the aim of promoting printmaking traditions while also engaging in political activism. Although he is currently retired, Fuentes continues to work as a mentor to young artists through his association with Pajaro Editions, his work as a founding member and curatorial advisor for Art 94124 Gallery in San Francisco, and as a visiting faculty member at the San Francisco Art Institute. In recognition of the political importance of his poster and linocut work, in 2009, the Center for the Study of Political Graphics awarded Fuentes the Art is a Hammer award.

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Further Reading


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Malaquías Montoya

Malaquías Montoya is known primarily for his silkscreen prints that emerged from the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Although he addresses many specifically Chicano issues, Montoya sees his work as relating more closely to the larger social issues of injustice, empowerment, and international struggle. In both his art and his extensive teaching career, Montoya has worked for more than 40 years to give voice to the working class and disenfranchised people from around the world.

Montoya was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on June 21, 1938, but his family soon moved to the San Joaquin Valley of California after a drought forced them out of their New Mexico home. Montoya's parents were both migrant farm workers and could not read or write Spanish or English. Montoya was one of seven children, and several of his brothers and sisters never received beyond a seventh-grade education since the entire family had to work as farm laborers in order to survive. Montoya was thus acutely aware of the farmworkers' struggle in California during this time, and this experience informed much of his later work as part of the Chicano movement during the 1960s.

After serving in the U.S. Marines from 1957 to 1960, Montoya attended the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied art. Montoya received his bachelor's degree from UC Berkeley in 1970. While at Berkeley, Montoya became involved in the protests and activism enveloping that campus in the late 1960s. As part of this activism, in 1969 Montoya founded the Mexican-American Liberation Art Front (MALA-F) along with fellow artists René Yañaez, Esteban Villa, and Manuel Hernandez Trujillo. The group held regular meetings to discuss the definition and purpose of Chicano art, and they coordinated several exhibitions of Chicano art. MALA-F later moved to Sacramento and—under the leadership of Montoya's brother, José—evolved into the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF).

While at Berkeley and as part of his activism work with MALA-F, Montoya created many politically charged posters and prints. Although MALA-F was focused primarily on Chicano voices and struggles, the group was also motivated by the struggles of other oppressed peoples such as the Vietnamese. During the Vietnam War in the 1960s, Montoya became involved in the antiwar activism and protests at UC Berkeley. He made many posters to support this cause, including *Vietnam/Aztlán* (1973), which visually links the causes of the Vietnamese and Mexican-American populations. Aztlán refers to *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* ("The Spiritual Plan of Aztlán"), a manifesto adopted at the first National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in Denver, Colorado, in March 1969, which called for a reclamation of Aztlán, the lands European Americans took from Mexico in the 19th century. Montoya's poster features a Vietnamese and a Chicano man framed above and below by hands locking together in a gesture of solidarity. Text at the top of the poster reads, "Unidos venceran" ("Together we will overcome"). The poster expresses Montoya's aim of linking the Chicano cause to that of other oppressed populations in a graphically powerful image.

As a result of works like *Vietnam/Aztlán* and Montoya's prolific output as a printmaker, historians have identified Montoya as a key artist in the development of the "social serigraphy" movement. This movement originated in the
San Francisco Bay Area and refers to the explosion of poster-making and serigraphy (silkscreen printing) that swept through California beginning in the 1960s. Like Montoya, many artists involved in this movement used their prints and posters as a means of calling for political and social justice for disenfranchised citizens, especially Mexican Americans. Posters and other serigraphic works were a key component to the development and expansion of the Chicano movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

After leaving Berkeley in the 1970s, Montoya continued his interest in picturing images of international struggle as a means of bringing solidarity to the Chicano community. Although he is primarily known for his silkscreen prints, Montoya has also worked as an easel painter and muralist. In his oil on canvas work *Un maestro pa' l future* (A teacher for the future, 1997), Montoya features a teacher as the central figure surrounded by his pupils. However, Montoya breaks down the barriers of traditional teacher/student relationships by picturing his teacher outside the classroom and identifying him as a working man with his overalls and rolled-up sleeves. In Montoya's painting, there is no distinction between the world of work and the world of learning. Like the Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera who came before him, Montoya pictures a working-class hero and role model as a means of uplifting and inspiring a Chicano audience.

Montoya has exhibited his work across the US as well as in Europe and Latin America. Beyond his artistic output, Montoya is also known for his extensive teaching career. After graduating from UC Berkeley, Montoya taught and lectured at several universities in the Bay Area of California. Most notably, Montoya taught at the California College of Arts (CCA) in Oakland where he was chair of the ethnic studies department for five years. He has also taught at Mills College, Berkeley, and at various community colleges throughout northern California. Since 1989 Montoya has held a professorship at the University of California, Davis, where he teaches both in the Department of Art and the Department of Chicana/o Studies. Montoya has also been an artist-in-residence at Stanford University and a visiting professor in the Art Department at the University of Notre Dame. Montoya has mentored many young Chicano artists including Juan Fuentes, a noted Chicano artist and printmaker. In addition to his art and his teaching activities, Montoya has also served as a board member of various art and activism organizations in California including Taller Sin Fronteras in Oakland and Centro César Chávez in Vacaville. He continues to live and work in Northern California today.

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Rudy Cuellar

Chicano artist Rudy Cuellar is best known for his work with the Sacramento-based artist collective, the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF). Cuellar's work with the RCAF has been driven not just by the impulse to make art, but also to engage and organize communities. In terms of art production, Cuellar and the RCAF are known for their mural paintings, poster art, and other collective public art projects.

Rodolfo "Rudy" O. Cuellar was born on November 23, 1950, and has spent much of his life living and working in Sacramento, California. From 1972 to 1980, Cuellar attended California State University, Sacramento, where he studied art and communication and eventually received his bachelor's and master's degrees.

Cuellar began working with the RCAF in 1969. Initially composed of members José Montoya, Esteban Villa, Ricardo Favela, Juanishi Orosco, and Louie "The Foot" González, the RCAF began as the Rebel Chicano Art Front and was based in Sacramento. However, because of the confusion with the acronym for the Royal Canadian Air Force, Cuellar and the initial members began calling themselves the Royal Chicano Air Force. The mission of the RCAF was closely aligned with the goals of the Chicano civil rights and labor organizing movement of the United Farm Workers (UFW). Cuellar and the other founding members sought to connect the Chicano community to a bilingual and bicultural arts center where artists and non-artists alike could congregate to create art and exchange ideas. RCAF sought to make artistic, cultural, and educational programs available to the public in an effort to engage communities and express Chicano culture and history.

During the 1970s, this quest for Chicano identity was a large part of the cultural landscape surrounding Cuellar. The Chicano movement that began with the activism of the 1960s was in full force by the 1970s, with members advocating for better political and social rights for Mexican Americans. Part of the Chicano movement, Cuellar along with the RCAF sought to help Mexican Americans develop a new political consciousness of their subordinated status in U.S. society, while also strengthening their collective ethnic and cultural identity. One way Chicano advocates sought to build this collective consciousness was through the creation of literary and visual art. Cuellar and the RCAF drew on this idea of constructing identity through art by making posters, murals, drawings, banners, flags, and bumper stickers to accompany various activism and protest events of the Chicano movement. A major activism event that came to define the RCAF was the movement to unionize and fight for farmworker's rights, which was led by César Chávez and others. Not only did Cuellar and the RCAF make hundreds of posters, signs, banners and other visual artworks to promote the events, they also marched with their fellow Mexican Americans. This typifies Cuellar's and the RCAF's practice of participating in Chicano movement activism through both the tangible art object and the active participation in protests and other politically charged events.

In his work with the RCAF, Cuellar participated in numerous projects, all with the goal of community activism. The significance of Cuellar's artwork is often found in the process of art-making and not just the final, completed artistic object. For example, one of Cuellar's projects with the RCAF was called "Fiesta de Maiz," First Annual Celebration of Chicano Cultural Ceremonies. Held in 1976 in the Zapata Park Housing Project in Sacramento,
this project was conceived by local artists working with various Sacramento artist and community-activism groups with the aim of filling the ceremonial void in the Chicano movement. This particular "Fiesta de Maiz" ceremony was designed to honor the coming of age of Chicana youths through the image of Xilonen, a young tender ear of corn (maiz). Cuellar participated with other artists in the construction of a ceremonial chair and pyramid and even provided his backyard as the site for this construction. The chair and pyramid were then transported to Zapata Park, where neighborhood children along with RCAF artists participated in a ceremonia involving dance and other community-building activities.

Along with helping to construct ritual objects for ceremonias, Cuellar also designed and helped produce pages for the annual Royal Chicano Air Force Calendario, which was printed throughout the 1970s. Calendarios ("calendars") are commonly found in Mexican American and Chicano communities, as Mexican businesses often give them away annually to their customers. Calendarios typically feature imagery that is culturally affirming, and as such, the RCAF began making their own silkscreen-printed calendars as an act of cultural reclamation. In the RCAF calendar, individual artists designed single pages for each month which were then bound together. For the 1976 RCAF calendar, the theme was Calendario de Comida ("Calendar of Food"). Cuellar contributed the calendar page for May, which he titled "Para mes Jefitas since the Dawn of Time." The screen-printed page features a large drawing of an ear of corn next to a box with the phrase Pais Raiz Maiz ("Country Root Corn") repeated around a square. Cuellar's page plays with the history of corn in the Chicano community. Corn has been an agricultural staple in Mesoamerican communities since the pre-Columbian era, but it has also served as an important symbol of cultural and political identity. Cuellar plays with the many ways corn has defined Chicano identity—politically, geographically, and socially—with his page for the 1976 RCAF calendar. Cuellar and the RCAF continued their work in the California Chicano community through the 1980s. Today, they continue to present art exhibits and carry out community building artistic projects.

In 1982, Cuellar founded R. O. Cuellar & Design, a Sacramento-based firm known for its commercial art and graphic design work. Cuellar and his firm focus on screenprinting and design work in the Latino/Chicano community. Cuellar's company has several employees and continues to operate in Sacramento today.

Lauren Gallow

Further Reading


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Entry ID: 1827584
Victor Ochoa

Known for his public murals and paintings, Chicano artist Victor Ochoa is recognized as one of the primary founders of the Chicano art movement in San Diego, California. Working to coordinate various large-scale public arts projects in the San Diego area, Ochoa seeks to promote and preserve Chicano art and culture with his work.

Born on August 2, 1948, in Los Angeles, California, Ochoa moved to San Diego to study art at San Diego State University, where he received a BA in fine arts in 1974. In San Diego, he became interested in border issues due to the city's close location to the U.S.-Mexico border. Ochoa has explored these issues personally as he has lived and worked on both sides of the San Diego-Tijuana border. While he is well known for his artistic work and his activism with various Chicano arts organizations, Ochoa has also taught various university courses on Chicano art and history. He taught for many years at Grossmont College in El Cajon, California as a professor of Mexican-Chicano Art History. Ochoa has also taught such courses as “Chicano Art at the Border Region” at such universities as the University of California, San Diego.

Ochoa is perhaps best known for his work with the Centro Cultural de la Raza, a community-based arts center and workshop located in Balboa Park, San Diego. Ochoa helped to cofound this center and served as its director from 1970 to 1973 and again from 1988 to 1990. Centro Cultural de la Raza began as an informal art center in 1968 when another of the cofounders, Salvador Roberto Torres, gained permission from the San Diego Parks and Recreation Department to use an abandoned facility in Balboa Park as an art studio. Torres invited other artists including Ochoa to use the studio with him, and soon painters, writers, dancers, and performance artists were using the space. Ochoa initially used the facility for painting large-scale murals and printing posters. Dissatisfied with the art classes he was taking at San Diego State, Ochoa found in Torres's studio a space and a community to support his developing poster and mural work. Soon, Ochoa along with other artists and activists working in the space began an effort to turn the occasional activities and workshops into a permanent community art center. Centro Cultural de la Raza was established in 1970 to achieve this goal, defining its mission as the promotion of Chicano culture by providing a space that encourages a wide variety of artistic practices.

As part of his work with the Centro Cultural de la Raza and during his tenure as an artist-in-residence there, Ochoa organized several public mural projects. Perhaps the most celebrated of these is the Chicano Park community mural project, which Ochoa helped co-initiate. This public art project began in 1973 when artists from across the state of California were invited to paint murals in Chicano Park, a small park located in a predominantly Mexican American community in central San Diego called Barrio Logan. Murals cover the park and represent the Chicano struggle to maintain a geographical presence in the area in the face of rezoning and construction projects that threatened to destroy the neighborhood in the 1960s. After many protests and community gatherings in opposition to the proposed changes to the neighborhood, the city of San Diego agreed to build a park in Barrio Logan. Ochoa and others helped coordinate the mural project in what came to be called Chicano Park, and by the late 1970s nearly every major Chicano muralist in California and the Southwest had contributed to the project. The murals are dedicated to various aspects of the Chicano and Mexican heritage of the community and are seen by many as a symbol of resistance. Ochoa has said that the murals speak for the
issues and concerns that continue to plague the local Chicano community. Today, Chicano Park represents the
country’s largest collection of outdoor murals, and in 1980 the park was designated an official historic site by the
San Diego Historical Site Board. In January 2013, the park was listed on the National Register of Historic Places
listings in San Diego County.

In 1984, Ochoa helped found the “Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo” (BAW/TAF) arts collective.
Along with a binational group of artists, activists, journalists, and scholars, Ochoa founded the group with the goal
of addressing social issues related to the Mexico–U.S. border. The group often carried out its projects at the
borderline itself, working frequently in Tijuana. These projects ranged from site-specific performance art to
installations and artificial environments that invited viewer participation. The group’s attempt to address the
political tensions of the borderlands was particularly salient at the time, given the NAFTA debates of the early
1990s. Ochoa worked with the BAW/TAF until 1993, and the group continues operating today with a mix of art
and activism projects.

Although he has worked steadily with various artist groups and collectives, Ochoa has also developed a strong
reputation with his solo work. He has exhibited his paintings and graphic prints in exhibitions from San Diego to
France, and has also designed several set designs for theatrical productions. Ochoa is credited with painting
more than 100 murals, most associated with his time as an artist-in-residence at the Centro Cultural de la Raza.
Although he no longer holds his teaching post at Grossmont College, Ochoa continues to inspire and mentor
young Chicano artists in the San Diego and Tijuana communities and beyond.

Lauren Gallow

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Zoot Suit (Theater, 1978)

Zoot Suit, a play written in 1973 by Luis Valdez, is widely regarded as the most significant piece of Chicano theater. Hugely successful when it opened in Los Angeles on July 28, 1978, the play was also the first Chicano theatrical production on Broadway when it opened in New York on March 25, 1979. Its theatrical success also inspired Universal Studios to convert Zoot Suit into a film that Valdez directed in 1981. The success of Zoot Suit across ethnic, class, and cultural lines represents its significance not just in the history of Latino theater, but for American theater in general.

Regarded as the father of Chicano theater, Valdez is a playwright, actor, writer, and film director. With Zoot Suit, his best-known work, Valdez is credited with revolutionizing Chicano theater. Valdez wrote the play while associated with his theater ensemble El Teatro Campesino, which he founded in 1965 in conjunction with the United Farm Workers (UFW) strikes. Like other artists of the Chicano movement of this time period, Valdez wrote Zoot Suit as an attempt to address the history of discrimination against Mexican Americans in the United States. In Zoot Suit, Valdez combined elements of El Teatro Campesino's street theater aesthetic with professional choreography and narrative elements. Weaving together big band music, choreography, and storytelling, Zoot Suit features music by Daniel Valdez and Lalo Guerrero, who is known as the father of Chicano music. The play broke box office records when it opened the Mark Taper Forum's opening season in 1978 in Los Angeles, playing to packed houses and rave reviews. The play subsequently continued its run at the Aquarius Theatre in Hollywood. The success of Zoot Suit is credited with launching the careers of a number of professional Latino/a film and theatrical artists, most notably, Edward James Olmos.

A work of historical fiction, Zoot Suit follows two significant stories of racial injustice in Los Angeles from the 1940s. Set in the streets of East Los Angeles, Zoot Suit recounts events of the 1942 Sleepy Lagoon case and the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots. These incidents became symbolic of the racial injustice against Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and across the country during this time period. The play follows Henry Reyna and members of the predominantly Mexican American 38th Street Gang, who were wrongly accused and convicted of murder. The play also treats incidents from the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots, where racial tensions escalated into violent confrontations between zoot suit–wearing pachucos, U.S. servicemen, and Los Angeles law enforcement. The play is set against actual testimony from the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial and press headlines from the 1940s, recounting these historical events through the eyes of a group of Mexican American youth. At the center of Zoot Suit is the character El Pachuco, an idealized zoot suiter played memorably by Olmos during the play's Los Angeles run.

Zoot Suit is recognized as a milestone not just in Chicano theater, but in the wider Chicano movement taking place in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. This political movement sought to bring greater attention to the history of exploitation and discrimination against Mexican Americans, while also reclaiming a Mexican American history and defining a Chicano identity. Zoot Suit marked a watershed moment in the Chicano movement, as its widespread success meant that issues of the Mexican American community were brought into mainstream American consciousness. Not only did the play open the door to Latino actors, but its production into
a film in the 1980s marked *Zoot Suit* as the first Chicano written, performed, and directed feature length film in history. The play continues to be performed in revival productions in theaters across the United States today.

Lauren Gallow

Further Reading


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