

# The importance of cultural heritage: Reflections on muralism in the Universidad de Sonora

## La importancia del patrimonio cultural: reflexiones de muralismo en la Universidad de Sonora

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### Abstract

Throughout history, muralism has been considered a key element in representing the identity of a cause, a movement and even a collective or a country. In Mexico, higher education (HE) institutions were also known for their various murals in their campuses through the last century. The case of the Universidad de Sonora, one of the most important public HE institutions in the State of Sonora, is one that needs to be reevaluated in regard to the conservation, preservation and memory of its murals. In this paper we discuss why the murals of the UNISON must be preserved and recovered for the historical memory and their cultural legacy. The paper describes and reflects on the murals in the institution and how they are an integral part of the academic and historical experience. The conclusions point to a broader need to explore, rescue, and promote such artistic expressions for generations to come.

Keywords: Fine Arts, Higher Education, Mexico, Educational Innovation, Muralism.

### Resumen

A través de la historia, el muralismo ha sido considerado un elemento clave al representar la identidad de una causa, un movimiento, un colectivo o un país. En México, las Instituciones de Educación Superior (IES) también han sido conocidas por

los murales en sus campus a lo largo del último siglo. Tal es el caso de la Universidad de Sonora (UNISON), una de las instituciones de educación superior públicas más importantes en el Estado de Sonora, la cual necesita reevaluar la conservación, preservación y memoria de sus murales.

En este ensayo discutimos porque los murales deben ser preservados y recuperados para la memoria histórica y por su legado cultural, por un lado; y, por el otro, describe y reflexiona sobre los murales de la UNISON como parte integral de la experiencia académica e histórica. Las conclusiones apuntan a una necesidad más amplia de explorar, rescatar y promover tales expresiones artísticas para las generaciones por venir.

Palabras clave: Bellas Artes, Educación Superior, México, Innovación Educativa, Muralismo.

### **Introduction**

This essay reflects on the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Universidad de Sonora. We mainly discuss the artistic murals within the institution and why they should be considered and preserved as a historical part of the community of the State of Sonora.

The muralism movement became part of the Mexican revolution, specifically when the country began its reconstruction period. In Mexico, muralism had a boom with the Escuela Mexicana de Pintura (Mexican Painting School) of the 20s, also during the 30s and 40s, with Jose Vasconcelos at the forefront of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP). His involvement with several artists of the era became pivotal in commissioning murals to his acquaintances of the Mexican art scene (Hirsch, Bonelli Zapata & Vales, 2021). Prominent muralism figures such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros among others (Carter, 2014; Coffey, 2010) used state buildings, public universities, and even foreign walls to represent the shared sentiment of the people: a call for change and revolution in the country.

Later, during the 1950s, some buildings of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) became canvases for Siqueiros, Rivera and Juan O'Gorman. Their murals transcended from being works of arts to being considered part of the identity of the university. With around 110 murals, UNAM paved the way for other HE institutions throughout the country to hold murals in their campuses.

The Universidad de Sonora (UNISON) is one of the oldest and most important educational institutions in northwestern Mexico, therefore its history is closely related to the region and the socio-political events that have occurred in it.

In the northwestern region of the country, the UNISON became a pillar in the community of the State of Sonora with its construction beginning in the year 1942. It was during this year that the university began to offer courses and became a synonym for education and prosperity to the State. Regarding its architecture, the rectory building was the first to be constructed by then up-and-coming architect Leopoldo Palafox Muñoz.

The rectory building was inspired by the Rationalism current during the 1930s and the architecture of North America of the time. Even with inspiration on American buildings, the rectory also incorporated a stained-glass mural with the history of the State as a symbolism of what the university would bring to the community. This mural was in the main stairway and, still to this day, remains preserved.

With the aid of Salvador Ortega, his brother Felipe Ortega Neri, both from the state of Puebla, Palafox Muñoz continued the university's expansion and construction with the Library and Museum of the university. Each building represented an opportunity to show modern architecture designs with a mixture of regional art in the form of murals in its walls. During the 50s, 60s and seventies, Mexico and the northwest region of the country was merging the arts in its public buildings.

Through the years, the Universidad de Sonora was graced with murals by Hector Martinez Arteche, Fernando Robles (Fin de siglo titled mural, displayed in the central library of the campus) and Melchor Peredo (El canto de Amalia titled mural, in the library and museum building) to name a few.

Martinez Arteche, who studied in the National School of Plastic Arts of the UNAM in 1948, was one of the first prominent figures of muralism in the State of Sonora. Not only did he arrive to the State in the year 1961 to head the Academy of Plastic Arts of the university but he also painted murals in the UNISON as well; he is also credited in painting the first mural in the State in the School of Agriculture of the university around 1963-1964 (Archivo General Universitario, 2022).

The expansion of the university's academic offer, as well as physical spaces provided artists with new canvases. Through the State of Sonora, the UNISON continued to build schools in Santa Ana (1963), in Caborca (1967), in Nogales (2006), in Cajeme (2010), among other campuses as well. In all these locations, the presence of murals also emerged. But, as new administrations and further development of the institution occurred, maintenance, preservation, and promotion of the murals of the university's campuses stalled.

Other key figures in the university's muralism history are Gustavo Ozuna González and Carlos Sergio Ríos Villegas, both professors in the Fine Arts department of UNISON.

Through their initiatives, themselves, and other artists (students of the undergraduate degree in arts, painting major) have been able to produce murals in several spaces in the university. Ozuna González, who studied Plastic Arts in the Escuela Nacional de Pintura y Escultura "La Esmeralda" in Mexico City, also helped create the Centro de Educación Artística (CEDART) in the city of Hermosillo, while pushing efforts for further representation and spaces for the arts in the city, the State, and the country.

The introduction of muralism to the university and the State alike paved the way to consider this art form as part of cultural heritage. Also, the merge between space and form of architecture and muralism began to be conceived by scholars and artists alike. Nonetheless, as mentioned, through the years, the murals that are part of the university's history became only a memory to its community. The construction of new buildings and the renovation of infrastructures alike did not take into consideration possible damages or alterations that could occur in the murals. These actions resulted in the quality of the paintings being tarnished, while the preservation of the murals became non-existent.

Eighty years have passed, and the history of the region has left a testimony in the walls of the central campus of the university. This is in the shape of different murals that show visions that founded a home in the minds of the students and teachers of the institution, this goes from ideological standpoints to artistic movements.

### **Studies on muralism as cultural heritage**

To understand the past is to preserve and prepare diligently for the future. In the case of the historic memory of an institution of such caliber as the UNISON, the task of comprehending the richness of artistic value in the university's murals must be necessary and prompt. Some past studies on muralism as historic and cultural heritage reflect the need these works of art must have to surpass the times and preserve its collective memory.

Some authors refer to the classic school of muralism in Mexico as the one that laid the foundation of considering the plastic arts as part of the history and identity of the people. Feria & Lince (2010), reconstruct the impact of the art form through the years in the country: from its foundation in the early twenties until the late sixties, when other types of mediums became more relevant and dominant in the art world. Overall, their study analyzes the history of muralism as a national artistic defense' in the first half of the last century.

Coffey (2002; 2012) has explored how muralism in public spaces has become part of the identity, history, and memory of Mexican culture. As the author explores, the emergence of Vasconcelos as head of the SEP in Mexico, made muralism present in public universities such as the UNAM, and state buildings, museums, and libraries. The author notes that, by commissioning the pieces by muralists such as Diego Rivera, plastic arts became a well-known medium to present the country's identity.

McGrath, Goldberg & Norman (2017) have previously captured the essence of the murals that grace several Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Among them, the study of the murals of Hale Woodruff at Talladega College, done in the late 30s and early 40s, is a critical part of the history of the university and history itself. Woodruff, just as Arteché, were art professors at different universities and painted several murals in them. In their research, the painters captured and championed the essence and historical and cultural importance of the murals of the HBCUs.

Other studies focus on the preservation efforts of murals that suffered damages due to natural contingencies. Lemus, Zavala & Varela (2018) analyzed how a planned process of rescuing, documenting, organizing, and storing collapsed parts of historical murals in the state of Morelos was implemented by the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). The murals that were examined belong to the Virreinal period during the XVI century, all of which belonged to several convents in the state. Their study also suggested further studies regarding "the construction stages of the building, its techniques and its construction materials, [in order] to understand the contemporary values of this heritage and reflect on how we would like it to be maintained for the enjoyment of generations future" (p. 74).

In the State of Sonora, Guerrero & De Gunther (2018) explored the muralism of Enrique Estrada in a public building in the city of Hermosillo. His work titled 'Historia de Sonora' was analyzed by the authors through technology applications of graphic editing such as Virtual Reality (VR). In their study, they experimented with programs that allowed them to represent such murals onto digital platforms, this meant that analysis of the painting can be done using noninvasive methods that are accessible to technology users around the world. As mentioned by the authors, such studies are new to the discipline, but are highly promising for their innovation aspect.

Cárdenas & Orozco (2019) took a historical approach to studying murals, specifically those in elementary schools in the State of Chihuahua. They used the historical figures as well as the symbolisms and even the text plastered in the paintings to interpret the historical characters of each work to comprehend the meaning behind

the murals, their intention towards that specific space and, as the authors mention, ‘offer a sense of identity’ (p. 156).

Other authors such as Hernandis (2021), are more direct at calling out the proper authorities to rescue the works that have suffered a lack of management, preservation, and conservation. As seen in many scenarios, the author states that murals without proper management by the corresponding agencies will be:

The disengagement of the inhabitants of the neighborhood with its meaning, without an effort by the institutions responsible for maintaining this dynamized and interpreted heritage, the conscience of the public vanishes. The works lose their value, and they are victims of one of the greatest enemies of heritage: abandonment and oblivion (p.159).

Hirsch, Bonelli Zapata & Vales (2021) aimed to provide an analysis on how murals of a city in Argentina affect the neighborhood’s identity and perception of its own public spaces. In their study, they also point out how the art “constitute[s] a possibility of revaluing institutions of social and neighborhood life, spaces for collective use that appeal to destigmatize local identities” (p. 24). Their study also analyzed how the community regenerated the murals to unite the people and the arts by creating a festival to promote and reeducate them on matters of art and its importance to their collective history.

Pinto & Rodas (2022) proposed to create a circuit in the city of La Paz to enhance and promote the murals of the community. This ‘second life’ to the works of art, they argued, can convey the message that art “is able to include the popular classes as subjects of representation and revalue mural art, (...) accompanied in addition to a political agenda that seeks” (p.5). Efforts to promote and preserve murals in a community, such as this study pointed out, can create a sense of identity and belonging to the city and its citizens. Similar efforts can be replicated to redirect interest in the plastic arts of an institution or a specific space.

These are among some of the recent studies that touch on the subject matter of muralism in public spaces, and as an artistic movement itself. We must note that most studies offer further analysis as suggestions to move forward with plastic arts analysis in the country and region.

### **Rescue and research of murals of the Universidad de Sonora**

The need to document and preserve the murals of the UNISON has been seen in previous attempts. Most of them offer insights into each individual work, its artist as well as general information of its creation, style, and location. Nonetheless, such attempts have not covered the preservation and promotion of the works of art that form the historical memory of the institution and the State.

A study close to the murals of the UNISON is that of Moncada (2001). In his book titled *Diálogo con Multitudes* (Dialogue with crowds) he analyzed several murals located throughout the State, including those that unfortunately had already disappeared, or were at risk of presenting damage at the time, due to neglect from state and public authorities. The study also emphasized on the work of Hector Martinez Arteché through Sonora. As previously mentioned, Arteché was a pioneer of muralism in the State and created several works at the Universidad de Sonora. Lastly, Moncada emphasized on the vast display of murals through Sonora and their importance to the community, as well as the urgent need for proper management, research, and promotion of such.



The effort that stands out the most regarding the documentation and research of the university's murals is that of Manuel Cuén Tanori's 2002 book titled *Murales en la UNISON* (Murals in the UNISON). In his work, the author not only described in detail each work (its artist, the style, general information of the creation and the exact location of the mural in the institution), but also contributed to preserving the cultural heritage of them by documenting them and inviting others to continue doing. The murals of the UNISON, as noted by the author, should also be conserved and highlighted when referring to funding the historical memory and heritage of the institution.

Most notably, as mentioned previously, Cuén Tanori's work (2002) can be considered a stepping stone towards up-to-date research and preservation of the murals that the institution has. In addition, the School of Plastic Arts of the Fine Arts Department of the UNISON constantly is in need to teach and develop actions towards these murals and others that are also part of the historical heritage of the State. Nonetheless, such attempts have failed to consider the visual and structural integrity of the murals that have been damaged or obstructed by the university's own authorities.

Camarena (2011) analyzes the work of Arteché who, not only was the pioneer of muralism in the State of Sonora but was also one of the first and most important artists to create murals in higher education institutions in the region. Camarena, for most part, touches one the vast body of work that the muralist created in the Instituto Tecnológico de Sonora (Technological Institute of Sonora) (ITSON), and in other public spaces and buildings around the city Ciudad Obregón, also located in Sonora. Camarena provided the community with the tools to enhance and promote such works with his research related to the matter. However, the author emphasized on the murals at ITSON and not the ones located in the UNISON. Nevertheless, similar approaches could be made towards the preservation, documentation, research, and promotion of UNISON.

We must note that government authorities have indeed promoted the transformation, preservation and promotion of murals around the capital of Sonora, Hermosillo. In *Estudios Sobre Arquitectura y Urbanismo del Desierto* (Studies on Architecture and Urbanism of the Desert) (2012), the official journal of the Architecture Program of the UNISON, Duarte Aguilar reported that the municipal government program titled "Hermosillo te quiero" had contemplated the promotion and restoration efforts of public spaces around the city. Some of these efforts included the restoration of public parks and popular downtown locations; however, the Universidad de Sonora was not part of the rescue and promotion action-plan.

The destruction of artistic murals of the UNISON has been studied in the past. Galaviz Hernández (2016), noted how some of these, created at the height of the student movement of 1991-1992 in the institution but became symbolism of it afterwards, were completely painted over by State and university officials. The author noted how, due to the political nature and criticism towards the government and university heads in most of the murals, all of them were constantly painted over until their permanent removal. His study specifically discussed murals in the outside walls of the institutions, paintings that were not commissioned by the university, but the author analyzes such works as part of the collective memory of the UNISON that represented a conflicting period. Attempts to document murals that once belonged in the university as part of artistic activism of university students, such as this study, can influence other analysis to recover and validate those works that indeed were commissioned by the institution and that urgently need rescue and preservation efforts.

## Conclusions

Independently from the idea that the murals try to express, they bring a character to the different spaces of the institution and have an influence in the overall image of the institution. Some of them have even turned out to be monuments of the community that surrounds it; furthermore, taking a significant role in some of the rituals that are involved in the educational sectors of Hermosillo, the capital city of the State of Sonora. Most murals in the State are in public buildings, all of them are considered important works of plastic arts because of the nature, the symbolism and the history that they represent.

The relevance of studying, preserving and promoting art is based on understanding the way and purpose of people's expressions. Art shows the feelings of not just an artist, but of an entire community; it is not reduced to just its creation, but also to its preservation and research. Muralism in Sonora is a clear example of how the need of state and institutional efforts need to maintain the cultural heritage of Sonora's community. Efforts should be aimed to research, promote, restore and document digitally the murals of the university and other public places in the State, this in order to preserve and conserve the identity of a region's era. To document and understand and reimagine the murals of the UNISON is to consider and enhance the history and the culture of the northwest region of Mexico.

In addition, with the emergence of new technologies and global connectivity in-real-time, efforts to document and promote the plastic arts of the UNISON and those of the State could be laid-out in virtual platforms for others to experience. The use of 360-degree videos and photographs, augmented reality and the use of quick response barcodes (QR Codes) could bring a new interest into the works, as well as a digital-era audience and, most importantly, preserve those works through the time and with new media. These efforts have been studied by previous authors (Guerrero & De Gunther, 2018; Trihanondo & Endriawan, 2018), where they explored the use of digital murals as a form of preservation and future presentations of those works that have already suffered some sort of detriment to their original integrity.

To conclude, there needs to be many collective efforts from federal and state leaders and from policy makers and institutional authorities, as well as other scholars and researchers alike, to protect and to showcase the university's murals, specifically those that are in state-run buildings and spaces such as those of the northwestern region of the State of Sonora.

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