How to Paint a Mural

What is a mural?
A mural is a large scale painting. A mural can be painted directly on a wall or on panels or canvas that can be attached to a wall.

What is the first step in painting a mural?
The first step in painting a mural is to develop a design. (See “Additional Considerations” for schools and community groups.)

What styles are appropriate for murals?
Murals can be painted in any style – hard-edge, impressionistic, realistic, abstract, or a mix of styles.

How is a small design made into a large scale mural?
There are various methods for turning a small design into a mural.
• A design can be drawn on paper with a grid. Each square is enlarged to a corresponding square on the mural. For example, a 12”x12” design divided into 1” squares can be made into a 12’x12’ mural in which each 1” square is transferred to the corresponding 1’ area of the mural.
• The design can be projected onto the wall or panel with a slide projector or opaque projector and then traced.
• The design can be sketched onto the wall or panel “freehand.” This method allows you to make corrections and adjustments to your design as you sketch.

What are the additional steps to painting a mural?
• Make sure your wall or panel is clean, dry and as even as possible. If painting on a wall, make sure the surface is not cracked or peeling. Repair the wall if necessary. If the wall is pealing, the mural will peal eventually, too.
• Prime the wall or panel with a high quality primer. This is an essential step, ensuring that the paint will stick to the wall or panel and that the mural will last.

• Paint the mural using a good range of colors. Indoor/outdoor house paint is fine for murals, but get the most vivid colors possible. If possible, use colors mixed at the factory, not in the paint store. Get a good range of primary and secondary colors, and white and black, and then use these basic colors to mix your own.

• Use a water-based paint if there will be any changes in temperature or humidity. Water-based paints allow more expansion and contraction than oil-based paints.

• If you can afford high quality acrylic paints, I recommend Golden Paints or those used by the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program.

• I do not put a sealant on my murals, although many artists do. I do not want to risk discoloration, cracking, chipping or peeling of the sealant. I prefer to rely on the quality of my wall preparation, my primer and my paint and allow for a direct experience of the mural.

What is the history of mural making?
Murals have been painted throughout history:

• Mosaic murals in ancient Greece, Italy and Sicily depicted everyday life.

• Fresco murals in Italy were often religious in nature.

• Mexican murals by Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros celebrated and taught history, including the Mexican revolution and ancient Aztec and Mayan cultures.

• The US experienced a surge of murals in the 60's and 70's.

• A recent resurgence of mural painting has especially occurred in Philadelphia, where thousands of murals exist.