

Nestled in Los Angeles' Valley Glen community between Oxnard Street and Burbank Boulevard, formally known as North Hollywood, is one of the most historically significant artistic sites in the state of California. Spanning the walls of the Tujunga Wash flood control channel, a mural can be found, separated into eighty-six individual parts. In unison, they come together to depict the history of the state of California, stretching from Prehistoric times into the 1960s, with a special focus on marginalized groups' impact on the region.

In today's article, we will be delving deep into what kind of an impact this site has made and just how the various artists employed tactics and techniques throughout the piece to convey potent, important messaging. To help analyze this piece, we'll be sticking mostly to using Historical Narrative Criticism, with a special focus on the use of pathos in the creation of this work. However, before we begin breaking down the different strategies and messages used by the work's creators, it's important to familiarize the audience with the mural in question!



“Division of the Barrios & Chavez Ravine”—(Section 72)

Coming in at nearly 2,754 feet long and 13.5 feet high, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* currently stands as one of the largest murals on the face of the Earth. From start to finish, the artists, including project leader Judy Baca and over four hundred community contributors, employed Chicano artistic styles throughout the mural, featuring elements such as unique color palettes, a steep rescinding perspective, and symbols found within Mesoamerican art. *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* highlights not only the initial boom and growth of California and the land it encompasses but also sheds light on many local, potentially nationally unknown events as well.







“Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo 1848”—(Section 28)

Since the completion of the mural in the summer of 1984, the goal of Judy Baca’s *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* has been clear to each and every visitor that encounters the breath-taking site: depict the history of California as we currently understand it, while also showcasing the extensive history marginalized groups have in the region for future generations to come. To complete this, Baca and her team of co-artists assembled the mural by depicting significant figures and events involving marginalized groups using the aforementioned themes of Mesoamerican art, as well as traditional European figurative art, while also paying homage to influential Mexican muralists of the early 1930s.

Baca, a Chicana muralist herself, viewed the mural’s creation as a chance to tell stories often overlooked during California’s lengthy history, saying the following: “When I first saw the wall, I envisioned a long narrative of another history of California; one which included ethnic peoples, women and minorities who were so invisible in conventional textbook accounts.”



The mural, also known to locals as “*The History of California*”, highlights such issues as racial equality, exploitation of people and land, and individual rights, making this site much more than just a mural depicting the tale of the surrounding land and inhabitants, but also a community pillar for acknowledging various injustices committed over time while also being able to preserve history as we know it for future generations to come.

Baca’s intention to bring not only a voice to the “lost” history of California and its significant figures but also create a living, breathing place to honor those who came before her is quite obvious throughout the mural’s many sections. As a result of the mural’s founders’ hard work, the impact *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* has had on the surrounding area has been immeasurable, with the site not only being declared a landmark on the National Register of Historic Places in 2017, but also being included in the curriculum for at least two public institutions in the immediate area.

Okay, so now that we know a little more about the mural and its creation, we have a better understanding of how to rhetorically approach this subject. Oftentimes, when discussing a piece of art this broad in both size and content, it is usually best to analyze different sections individually.

Our first example of the mural’s creators’ use of the narrative method or approach can be seen in the styles that she employs throughout the various sections of the wall. *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* not only stands as one of the largest publicly accessible murals in the world, but it also represents one of the premier examples of the “social realism” genre in muralism. Social realism, as understood in the art world, is a style of painting in which an artist creates art that aims to

*Angeles* not only stands as one of the largest publicly accessible murals in the world, but it also represents one of the premier examples of the “social realism” genre in muralism. Social realism, as understood in the art world, is a style of painting in which an artist creates art that aims to draw attention to the often hidden or stifled history of marginalized groups. In the typical use of social realism themes in art, an artist might employ this tactic as a way to critique the power structures behind the stifling of history. To help readers visualize this art style for themselves, Grant Wood’s *Magnum Opus* is one of the most famous examples of an artist employing this style within their works.

In Baca’s case however, I would argue that she uses the style slightly differently. Rather than critiquing the establishments that she believes played the biggest role in stifling out marginalized groups’ history in the region, the Department of Education and the United States Government as a whole, Baca chose a different path. While visiting certain sections of the mural, visitors may come across paintings exposing the true injustices and brutalities committed against the various marginalized groups within the region. In doing this, Baca is appealing less to the critiquing side of the style and more in the direction of forced acceptance. Through showcasing the cruelty and brutality handed down to the marginalized groups of the region, Baca forces many to come to terms with this nation’s troubled past, something some may not be capable of on their own.

Another critical part of the narrative approach is understanding not just the style in which a piece was created, but also why it stuck so well with a target audience. As we spoke about previously, Baca felt it was important to follow her Chicano roots and present the region’s history through a Mesoamerican art lens. This, I believe, was crucial to her because she knew it would help create a sense of belonging and comfort for many within her community.

As we spoke about before, Baca’s ability to incorporate various shapes and colors synonymous with Mesoamerican art allowed her to create a strong connection between the mural’s content and its many visitors, seeing as how a large portion of the mural features prominent Mexican American historical events. In fact, many of the specific tribes and groups featured in the mural often reside in or around the local area, allowing many factions to use it as a living, breathing history book to teach children about their people’s past.

As we spoke about earlier in this article, Baca opted to include sections that featured scenes full of brutality and violence, often being committed against marginalized groups. As tough as some of the scenes are to view and begin to understand, these were crucial for Baca to include as they show the real, whole truth of the complete history of the region, a version that previous generations opted not to tell for one reason or another. This presentation of the subject by Baca leaves the audience feeling angry and disgusted about the stifling out of this much history as well as about the sheer cruelty represented in some of the scenes. This, in my opinion, details just how purposeful and matter-of-fact Baca was in appealing to her audience through the approach of Pathos, as she’s able to perfectly utilize her content in such a way as to garner emotion from visitors to the mural.

Having now studied Judy Baca’s *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* in two separate classes here at James Madison University, I can confidently say this is one of the most polarizing pieces of art here in the United States. From utilizing different Mesoamerican art techniques and skills to featuring some of the most important and respected figures among marginalized groups in the region, Baca truly used the narrative approach to her advantage to create a connection between the mural’s content and its visitors. Through the city’s team of volunteers and other community members, like Baca herself, the mural continues to be maintained and restored each year so it can continue to educate and bring together communities living within the California region.