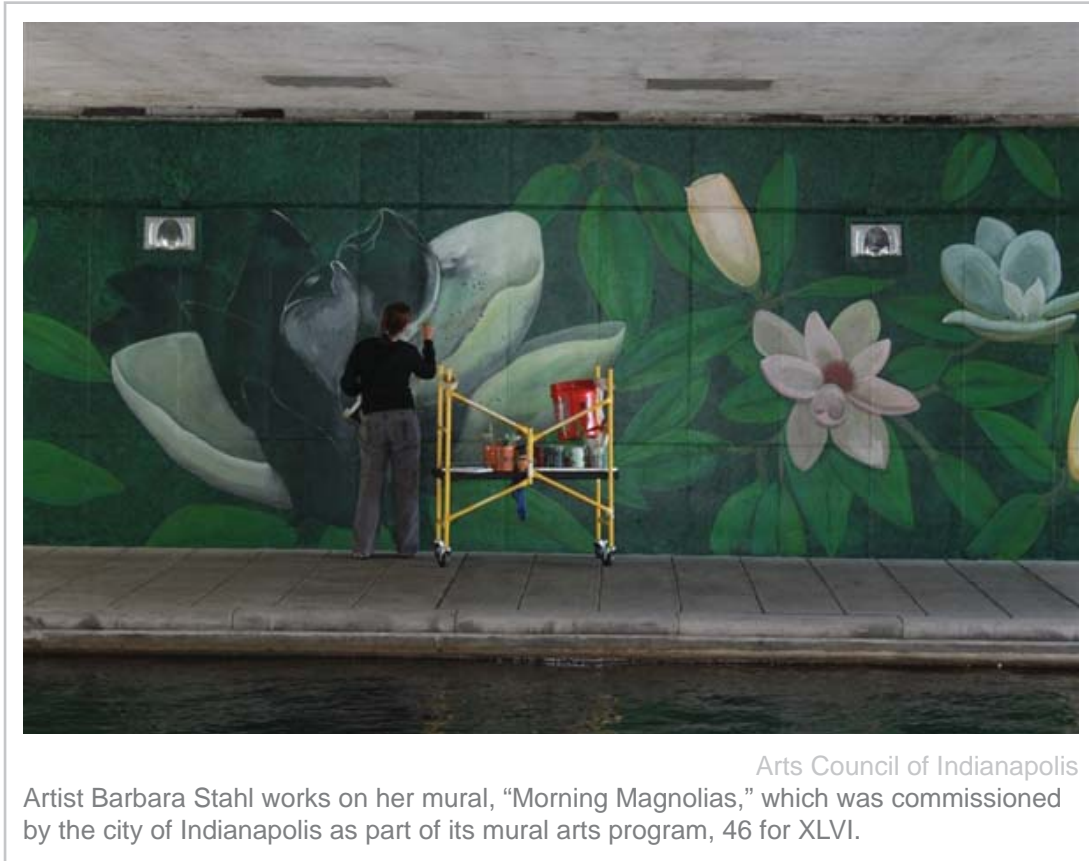




# America's must-see murals

By Rob Lovitt, msnbc.com contributor



Arts Council of Indianapolis  
Artist Barbara Stahl works on her mural, "Morning Magnolias," which was commissioned by the city of Indianapolis as part of its mural arts program, 46 for XLVI.

Attention, culture buffs: If you like to take in the arts when traveling but don't relish the prospect of spending a nice fall day indoors, get out.

As in outside, on the street, where an increasing number of cities are using murals to honor their history, showcase local neighborhoods and provide visitors with a glimpse of their surroundings that they might not otherwise get.

"Murals are available to everybody virtually all the time," said Lawrence Reger, president of Heritage Preservation, a nonprofit group that, among other efforts, seeks to save endangered murals. "You come across a mural and, hopefully, it'll brighten your day but also give you the opportunity to learn something about the area."

Traditionally, that's meant capturing a scene from local history. In Fort Worth, Texas, for example, the Chisholm Trail Mural is a trompe l'oeil commemoration of the cattle drives of 1867-1875. In Steubenville, Ohio, a mural pays tribute to favorite son Dean Martin.

But murals can also provide a glimpse into contemporary urban life, an approach that art historians trace back to the late William Walker, who many believe launched the community mural movement in Chicago with his

piece, “Wall of Respect,” in 1967.

Spanning two stories of a building on the city’s South Side, the mural depicted dozens of famous African Americans, ranging from Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois to Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. Although it was destroyed by a fire in 1971, it spread the idea that murals could showcase current events as well as historic ones.

“It’s important to hold on to your past, but you also have to acknowledge that change is happening all the time,” said Jane Golden, executive director of the Mural Arts Program, a city-supported nonprofit arts group in Philadelphia .

And more cities appear to be getting the message. “There’s been a huge interest in the last few years in muralism as a 21st-century art form,” said Golden. “Boston, Atlanta, Detroit, St. Louis ... this year, there’s been rarely a week that goes by that I don’t get several calls.

“It comes down to how we define public space,” she said, likening today’s muralists to the artists of the Depression-era WPA . “That outpouring of creativity, imagination and community support manifests itself on walls throughout a city.”



Mural Arts Program  
A segment of the 85,000-square-foot mural, “How Philly Moves.”

Or cities, as the following five destinations clearly display:

**Philadelphia:** Many municipalities call themselves “The City of Murals” but Philadelphia truly earns the moniker with more than 3,600 artworks around the city. Among the newest is an 85,000-square-foot mural at Philadelphia International Airport. Called “How Philly Moves,” it celebrates dance and will be dedicated on Oct. 12.

The dedication is just one part of the city’s Mural Arts Month, now running through Oct. 31. Coordinated by the Mural Arts Program, the event includes free and paid mural tours by foot, bike and trolley.

**Los Angeles:** According to the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs, Los Angeles is home to an estimated 1,500 murals, many a reflection of its multicultural heritage.

Among the most significant is the “Great Wall of Los Angeles,” a 2,754-foot-long depiction of the city’s history that runs along the wall of the Tujunga Flood Control Channel in the San Fernando Valley. The painting began in the mid-1970s and continued for several years; the mural was rededicated last month after being restored.

Elsewhere in the city, murals face a more challenging future as they’ve been caught in the crossfire between street artists and city rules over signage. “At present, new murals are prohibited on private property,” said Pat Gomez of the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs. “However, murals can -- and are -- placed on city, county, state or federal property.”

That’s not stopping some muralists, though; a project known as LA Freewalls has worked to put up art around the city, including this just-completed 106-foot wide mural called “Heartship.”

**San Francisco:** Located in the city’s Mission District, the Precita Eyes Mural Arts Association leads weekend walking tours of the surrounding neighborhood. Highlights include “Women’s Wisdom Through Time,” aka “Maestrapeace,” a four-story mural highlighting women’s contributions throughout history, and “Vamos Gigantes,” a pictorial chronicle of the city’s love of its hometown baseball team.

**Chicago:** October is Chicago Artists Month and the city’s diverse neighborhoods offer a kaleidoscopic view of murals and the people who make them. Popular destinations include Pilsen, where the artwork reflects

the local Hispanic community, and Uptown, where “The Roots of Argyle” mural portrays multiple waves of immigration between 1900 and 2000.

Can’t decide? Check out ChicagoGreeter.com, a free city-sponsored program that matches visitors with knowledgeable locals who provide free tours customized to a neighborhood, language or special interest.

**Indianapolis:** Indiana’s capital may not be known as a mural mecca, but that could change very soon. In July, the city launched “46 for XLVI,” an ambitious effort to create 46 murals in anticipation of hosting its first Super Bowl next February. Many of the works will display local historical figures and events; others will take a more whimsical approach, portraying surreal visions of plants, animals and imaginary creatures.

Supporters hope to complete the project by late November; until then, visitors should head to the Central Canal, north of downtown, where a mile-long stretch of wall is expected to feature 10 completed pieces by the end of this month.



Arts Council of Indianapolis  
The “Pennway” mural, by artist Erik Pearson, is one of 46 commissioned by the city of Indianapolis.

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*Rob Lovitt is a longtime travel writer who still believes the journey is as important as the destination.*

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