The Great Wall

Discover the story behind one of California's famous public artworks.

By Elizabeth Aaron

This famous mural shows scenes from the history of Los Angeles.

If you happen to be in Los Angeles, California, be sure to check out the city's most famous outdoor artwork: the Great Wall. This colorful mural, which depicts the many different cultures of Los Angeles over time, has

been a popular attraction for locals and tourists for more than 40 years.

The idea for the mural came about in 1974. That's when the Army Corps of Engineers contacted artist Judy Baca. They told Baca that they wanted her to create something that would make the neighborhood look nicer. Baca immediately thought of a long gray wall that runs along a highway in the area. She figured she could transform it into something special.

"I wanted to create something that told the history of California," says Baca. "A history that included ethnic peoples, women, and minorities who were invisible in regular textbooks."

A Community Affair

At the beginning of the project, Baca supervised 10 different artists—each one painted scenes from a different time in history. But soon, she invited local teens and their families to help. This was an important part of the project for Baca. By allowing them to work on the mural, she was keeping them off the streets—and away from gang violence.

"It gave them something to do—something they could feel proud of," said Baca.

Judy Baca admires the mural that the community helped her create.

By the end of the year the mural stretched to 1,000 feet. It featured events that took place from the time of dinosaurs to the year 1910. But Judy wanted to continue.

For four more summers, artists and historians worked to paint more scenes. Each year, they added another 350 feet to the mural. The mural runs 2,754 feet now, and covers California's history up to the 1950s.

Praise for the Painter

Baca's mural was an immediate hit. It attracted the attention of locals and art critics, who loved its portrayal of Los Angeles culture. They also praised Baca for getting the community involved.

In 2010, Baca was awarded the Public Art Network award for her work by an organization called Americans for the Arts. "Judy exemplifies

the power artists and the arts have to transform communities," said Robert Lynch, the president of the organization.

While Baca is proud of her work, she knows it isn't over. Her goal is to complete the time line so that it shows events leading up to the present day.

"When the mural is finally completed, it will be a mile long!" said Baca proudly.

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