

Political Mural Painting in Chile

The tradition of mural art in Chile began in 1963 during the political campaign for President between Eduardo Frei Montalva and Salvador Allende. Frei was much better funded and organized and hired a team of professional propagandists. The Christian Democrats put an image of stars up all over the city of Valparaíso, which was the symbol for Frei together with the slogan “50.000 becas para los niños pobres”. This took the supporters of Allende by surprise and their response was to paint, a group of four Xs all over the city, with the help of students.

This initial work had no artistic goal at its root, and lacking careful planning they made many errors, such as painting their symbol of Xs on monuments, buildings, and historical places, which caused a strong negative response from the public. This put the Allendistas on the defensive.

In this climate, a small group of artists – the painter Jorge Osorio, a student of architecture Osvaldo Stranger, and Patricio Cleary – took the lead and decided to paint constructive and artistic images with messages on the walls along streets to represent the aspirations of the Allendista popular party. They decided to paint the Allende Xs next to the Frei stars with a new slogan, “En el Gobierno Popular no habrá niños pobres”.

This led to a more artistic expression designed by Osorio and more complex murals on the walls of the Avenida España, a strategic artery between Valparaíso and Viña del Mar. They painted the new mural in a single night. This was the first political mural ever painted in Chile – in July 1963.

With the support of leaders, including the popular Pablo Neruda, brigades of young people used this new form of expression to transmit a message of hope for the candidacy of Salvador Allende.

The art of the political muralists became more and more sophisticated over the years portraying beautiful designs. These were done on the fly with the expectation that rain and other elements would destroy them in a few days, and that they had to paint new ones quickly to avoid arrest by police and government agents – often over the top of older murals. This means that few of the original murals remain.

However, in an interesting accident of nature, in June 1979 a violent flood in the Mapocho River rose to cover the walls along its banks. The flood waters cleaned off successive layers of paint from the walls revealing remains of murals completed during the presidential campaign of 1964. Thus, some of the old pro-Allende murals reappeared right in the middle of the Pinochet dictatorship.

References

[*Street Art Chile*](#), Rodney Palmer, Eight Books Ltd. (2008).

[Chilean Protest Murals](#), Harvard College Library Digital Collections.





