Peoria’s Community Art Rises

by Steve Tarter

In the city of Peoria, art isn't relegated to the walls of a museum. Works of art are increasingly going public in this central Illinois city.

Most noticeable are the murals that are going up in all parts of town--from the majestic "Abraham Blue" on the Peoria County Courthouse, overlooking the spot where U.S. Senatorial candidate Abraham Lincoln outlined his opposition to slavery in 1854, to Jessica McGee’s artwork just up the street that adds a touch of the jungle to the exterior of the Lava bistro on Main Street.
Seven of the city's 30 murals have gone up in just the past year, said Doug and Eileen Leunig, Peoria artists who have spearheaded the mural explosion in the city and are promoting the second annual Big Picture Festival Oct. 11-12 that will add still more color to the Peoria street scene.

"Murals are a visible sign of freedom of expression. Far removed from museum fine art, community art murals speak to everybody," said Doug Leunig, who produced the Lincoln mural that hangs on the courthouse.

Jenn Gordon, executive director of ArtsPartners of Central Illinois, the not-for-profit group that promotes arts in the area, said the Leunigs have done something else in addition to spurring on artists. "In addition to art that stays in place, we've got mural programs that now can rotate from one location to another," she said.

"Abraham Blue is a dynamic, large-scale piece but it won't be there (on the side of the courthouse) forever. Something else will replace it. That's something that people can look forward to--every two or three years, there will be a new story," said Gordon.

That portability is due to technology the Leunigs have employed that allows murals to be produced on vinyl and hung on a building. That allows for flexibility and the opportunity to move artwork around, said Doug Leunig.
"Technology and teaching has given us tools that would allow middle school students to create and execute 200-square-foot paintings," he said.

"Kids today can create a piece of public art like the students at Sterling Middle School when they made a 20x10 mural that now hangs on the Peoria Public Schools administration building," said Doug Leunig.

While art goes up all over town, the Leunigs have also helped establish a pipeline that looks to yield artistic benefits for Peoria's future while providing the city's students the chance to express themselves creatively.

The couple have partnered with the Peoria school and park districts on programs that offer young people the opportunity to work with mural artists while completing work for public display. Four Peoria schools will showcase murals completed this summer while student artwork will also be on display at Glen Oak Park in time for the park district's 125th anniversary celebration later this year.
Area businesses are recognizing the mural movement. "After we had to remove a beautiful tree that was disrupting our foundation, we noticed what a huge bare wall we had," said Angela Fritch-Milton, general manager at Fritch Heating & Cooling, 1004 NE Adams St. The company decided to contract with artist Angey Goudie, wife of Fritch service technician Brent Goudie, who chose to make Helena, the Fritch shop dog, the subject of a mural that will go up this month, she said. "The painter chose her because she's a three-legged dog that can do whatever she sets her mind to and she's a therapy dog," said Fritch-Milton.

Another mural planned for Peoria will be completed in the Warehouse District at the Big Picture Festival on Oct. 12. Artist Andre Petty said his mural will recognize hometown hero Richard Pryor.

"I've been drawing and painting since I was a little kid. I never pursued art in college but I kept doing stuff on my own. I watched YouTube videos to learn more about art," said Petty, 49, an employee of the Peoria Fire Department who participated in his first area art show in May. "People have asked me to paint things before but since the Peoria Heights Art Fair in May, I've had a lot of requests for work," he said.

Helping artists find recognition is just one of the benefits of the mural movement, said Peoria Mayor Jim Ardis. "Murals add a unique dimension to the growing prominence and appreciation of the arts in our community. From other cities in Illinois, I would rate Peoria in the upper tier, possibly behind only Chicago," he said. "I believe that there's a relationship between the growth of art and technology in our community. They both include elements of innovation, creativity and have no boundaries," said Ardis.

Murals have become a popular way for a city to draw attention to itself. In May, a festival in Rockford saw the creation of eight murals in five days. Illinois towns like Danville and Streator now display the mural works of the Walldogs, a group of over 100 artists from across the the country and around the world who descend on a town to deliver a pre-arranged battery of world-class murals.

In Streator, for example, murals completed in 2018 relate the city's reputation as the glass container capital of the world and identify Streator native Clarence Mulford as the creator of cowboy hero Hopalong Cassidy.

Midwest magazine recently cited murals as one of Cincinnati's top attractions. "Pad your walking time for mural gawking. Bolivar Alley in the emerging Pendleton neighborhood showcases raw graffiti creations by teens in the ArtWorks apprentice program," the magazine noted.
In the 21st century, murals serve another function, according to John Chikow, president of the Magnificent Mile Association, who told Crain's Chicago Business that one of the group's initiatives in 2019 is to create "identifiable spots that present classic selfie moments."

Whether displaying art, relating history or serving as a backdrop for the selfie movement, murals are finding a home in Illinois. In the Peoria area, building owners take note. "If you have a blank wall, get hold of us," said Eileen Leunig.

Eileen Leunig and ArtPop Gallery director Wendy Hickey pose in front of Dana Baldwin's ArtPop billboard sized art repurposed for the halls of Methodist College.

Pollinator photographer Mike McGarvey poses with his family in front of his first mounted mural at Gabbert Art Park where Big Picture Peoria Street Festival will be held October 12, 2019.