



Global Mural, Arts & Cultural Tourism Association

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It's official. We simply love it! That's why we start and why we stay with it!

At the fourth biennial Conference of the Global Association for Murals Art & Cultural Tourism, held in desert city Ely Nevada, over 100 participants were invited to complete an extensive questionnaire as a component part of the Association's intelligence gathering. In particular was there guidance to be had for those planning the Association's regional Seminars already scheduled in 2005 for Bowen Queensland and Bishop California; and for future Global Conferences scheduled for Prestonpans Scotland in 2006 and Sheffield Tasmania in 2008. Previous conferences and seminars since 1998 in Chemainus BC, 29 Palms California, Moosejaw Saskatchewan, Lindsay California and Kati Kati New Zealand had seen beyond doubt that there was a wholesome desire for networking and sharing and comparing regionally and globally, but could that begin to be quantified. How can the whole of the Association be greater than the sum of its 60 city members?

The sample base: There were fifty completed responses included in the analyses given below hosting more than a thousand murals in small towns and cities across the globe. As a sample it cannot be called statistically 'representative' of the membership because those who attend any given event tend to be drawn mainly from the nearer rather than the far flung membership. But the Australians, the Georgians and the Scots, were there and so were the Canadians. But the strongest representation was of course from the western states of the US.. Nonetheless, there is every reason to believe that the respondents are very 'typical' in most respects - as the networking and information sharing at this and all previous seminars and workshops has demonstrated.

How Did We All Get Involved.... and Started?

If we are an artist, our involvement has normally arisen from a formal commission, but not always. Frequently as an artist, seeing what was taking place, we simply resolved to join in. For the rest of us worldwide, the reasoning was this: In each of our communities times were not as good as they had been and here was an idea that looked well set to do something about that. And a fun and creative idea at that. The outcome would be a visually more attractive downtown area and maybe bus loads of tourists. Whether the initiative grew from our local Downtown Business Association seeking to resurrect or boost trade, from us as individuals thrown out of work by mine or plant closures, our simple wish to be rid of eyesores

and empty lots by embellishing and beautifying our town for its centennial celebrations, our desire to clean-up for the city school's Class Reunion, to help constructively after gaining access to baronial lands, to ensure the town's survival after a bypass took through traffic away or even if our river which had given us our role as a port departed leaving us with just an oxbow lake it seemed a fascinating way forward. We all felt we could help, or were willingly enticed in by spouses or colleagues and friends knowing of our latent financial or construction skills. And with the honorable exception of Chemainus [someone always has to be first] who set the whole notion running, almost every one of our towns or cities had the golden opportunity to visit where it had already worked to build our courage and wise up. Almost every one of our town's leadership and more than half of us as individuals had been to Chemainus itself, and an equal proportion of our towns had invited Founder Dr Karl Schutz to visit us on the ground to tell out loud how it was and can be.

Why Have We Stayed With It so Long?

Those of us who came to Ely are not quitters. We may well be storing up succession problems downstream for our Murals Societies but we have been involved from the start and are still there, the great majority for 5 years or more and the largest segment 10+ years. 90% of us have been at it without a break. And we have stayed involved because "we love the outputs, we love the process and we love the challenge". If a Global Association and its members and its members' towns and cities need love, we've got it.

Regenerating a town to which we all belong, grew up in or have adopted, is potentially bound to be a fulfilling challenge. What Chemainus showed and what others have amply validated is that if we stick with the historical theme in mural art and keep the art in a form that the community at large can immediately appreciate, we have an almost unbeatable formula for regenerative activity. The act of painting history triggers the next era of history in the making. A town that feels good, and has painted murals stands up and runs, and attracts visitors aplenty.

And success makes us all feel good. The murals are coming along, they are being appreciated, we are talking about them and so is everyone else. Something intensely public is happening in town and we are part of it. We have no desire to jump ship.

Mural Preferences Back Home and Why

In accordance with the explanations given for our involvement it is perhaps not surprising that we were not overly concerned with which mural we liked best. And even when we did the explanations as to why were not passionate but rather reflective. We like them all, the best and the maybe not so good, faded or crumbling.

Because we are here for the gestalt, the total effect, our passion is for the total effect. When there was a preference expressed it was either because of some deep personal involvement with content or the artist or because it captured an historical event so perfectly that it warmed the soul. Examples cited were Ely's Basque shepherds and its Liberty Pit reminding local people of just exactly how life must have been like not that long ago as do Vale's Oregon Trail. Vernon relished its multiculturalism and Lindsay its First Responders for 9/11. Yet to be fair to the artists themselves, there were more than a few instances where sheer admiration for a particular artist's talent and/or controversial creation as with 29 Palm's Valentine The Bull gave it pride of place.

Organisation and Fund Raising

Most of us are organized as local Societies with memberships that have been constant for many a year but a few are City sponsored Arts Councils. There are also more than a few charismatic leader models around as should be expected in what are normally social volunteer enterprises. Questions were not asked about the ages of participants but observation readily shows that age will over a modest time horizon weary us.

Raising funds is as big a consumer of our energies as getting murals painted. Some of our towns have the benefit of governmental grants and some of considerable benefactions but most organize a wide range of activities that are a social process in their own right. Local businesses are enticed to contribute or prepare walls and many will sell merchandise ranging from mugs and post cards to excellent art books and reprints. Auctions silent and out loud are popular as are membership programmes but radio pledges, loyalty cards, local 'optional' parking meters for the arts, coin pots on counters, mural painting 'fests' and re-enactments all have their place. There is also a place for totally unrelated events such as golf tournaments, yards sales and raffles. Direct or ancestral facial participation in especial murals has also become a saleable proposition.

There are few approaches which seek to address sustainability either of organization structures and their memberships or funding per se. Most of us look to 'economic takeoff' in our communities as our goal rather than painting murals till there is not a single surface left.

We also recognize very fully that success in attracting many types of funding are dependent on demonstrating that it already works! To this end we shared some of the notions we have formulated to measure efficacy. Some towns had available measures such as sales tax which can be shown to have increased or motel/ facilities/ tourist associations able to show favourable trends; others sought qualitative measures of community self esteem and pride in community and greater interest in/ attendance at arts classes; others looked to see how additional local activity and local events had occurred; yet others measured foot fall in given areas

of town and in one case at-risk youth involvement numbers.

What is our 'Art' anyway?

The great majority of us define 'art' for our communities very broadly and although we all started with murals we have been content even pleased to consider and adopt many more of the visual and performing arts. Sculpture is significantly used. In Scotland brewing real ale is classified as a performing art and theatre is widely present not least in the Chemainus Arts Theatre, Moosejaw's reopened theatre and Georgia's Swamp Gravy. And of course there are more than a few music festivals and concerts most particularly 29 Palm's Gala in the Joshua Tree National Park and the upcoming Bagpipe Opera at Prestoungrange. Most recently totem carving is to be used. Many of the souvenirs produced such as tiles and mugs are locally made.

Finally mention must be made of the very comprehensive literary work often involved in historical research and publication as well as the graphic design art displayed in the publications.

For more than a few of us however, hearing how others have defined 'art' so widely, there was a reported feeling that our own activities can sensibly and suitably be broader yet.

Why do visitors come to our towns?

If for many of us the overarching rationale for murals and more is to attract visitors and tourists, it certainly did not sound that way in the responses we gave. Our towns' artistic reputation was a destinational draw card but not the strongest.

Stopping over en route to some place else, and for local recreation and events for out-of-towners were the most frequently mentioned reasons. And of course other major town features such as museums, theatres or casinos all played a part.

[If funding was no object] What single thing would do most to advance our towns' arts programmes?

Paradoxically in view of many of the earlier opinions expressed, the most consistent element on our Wish Lists for our towns was better provision for (i) teaching the arts (ii) practicing the arts, and (iii) bringing in internationally famous artists to paint. The first two by and large meant bricks and mortar homes for such activities.

The balance of our wishes ranged far and wide and were town specific e.g. sidewalk and streetscape improvement, revival of dinner plays or an old heritage museum, more City support, improvement of derelict building lots and plots, converting a river front to a marina, opening a new restaurant or co-ordination with tour and bus companies.

What Are our Future Plans and our Roles within them?

With Wish Lists to one side, what did we already have on the stocks for the short and medium term? In the short term we were virtually all intent on 'more murals'. Other activities once again reflected each of our town's individual circumstances. For example we were in process creating a comprehensive inventory of murals and their maintenance schedules; developing interactive arts programmes simultaneously including visual arts performing arts literature and music; creating totem poles; organizing a symposium and artists meetings; or expanding our websites.

For the medium term centennial celebrations were being planned and a Shakespeare Festival; the next two Global Conferences were to be convened; a convention center was being constructed and a salt works; an historical pottery exhibition was to be organized; historical buildings were to be refurbished and a store reopened; more murals and illumination of them were in hand; and a regional murals route was to be crafted for eight valley towns. Plenty to be getting on with in short.

And to a not inconsiderable extent we were the movers and shakers in our communities. Almost all of us were Committee Members locally and more than a few had made personal investment gifts or initiated the programme in the first place.

Why Come to Ely and What Surprises did we have?

Analyses showed that as movers and shakers we had traveled far and wide and seen quite a few mural towns. Typically most of us who responded to the questionnaire had seen ten or more mural towns and very few less than three. In making those visits far and wide we had clearly seen how much could be learned from share and comparing. So we had overwhelmingly come on this occasion to Ely to network further and to interact with others who we know full well are addressing the same challenges each one of us faces. In doing so we expected to be able to return home ready to make some inspirational progress. We also loved to be able to feel the feeling of being part of something that is bigger than our own town indeed global, adopted and validated in far away Australia and Scotland. Reasons enough if funds and time permit to come to Ely.

And intriguingly consistent with our motivation for attending, we indicated that we had been 'most greatly surprised' just how much network and interaction was accomplished. And the sheer quality and competence of the others we met in areas right across the spectrum from painting to management. There was particular and universal admiration for how much Ely had achieved in just five years and its diversity from acquiring the old JC Penny store, to painting up derelict downtown gas stations and stores to look inhabited, painting murals galore, creating a massive downtown sculpture and labyrinth ... all the while planning and organising the

Global Conference. What energy we all said. And what a welcoming style the community had.

So What Does 'Global' Mean?

Most of us as individuals and most of our towns did not seek to qualify for membership of the Global Association, or sigh for the chance to attend its biennial conferences and regional seminars and symposia. We joined to help our own town prosper and flourish again. We were certainly more than willing to go to Chemainus as the founding role model and putative fount of much wisdom on how to proceed to those ends.

But on our travels, many of us to ten or more other mural towns and cities, we saw clearly that there was a greater community of knowledge than Chemainus and our home town. Managerially as well as artistically we immediately saw ideas to imitate, and met leaders and the led who had stories to tell and wisdom to impart. And frankly we also found great international fellowship too. The Global Association has made it easier by its biennial conferences to network and interact.

Far more than the equivalent value of 10 town visits, often far and apart, can be gained in three days. And our conference curriculum is common to us all whether it be preparing walls, raising project funds, dealing with local town halls, choosing the right paint, getting a sensible hold of copyright issues, maintaining murals, broadening the involvement of others and across the visual and performing arts, attaining a sustainable source of funds, regenerating the committee's membership and/ or its top leadership ... the list may seem long but in reality it is not. The Global Association we knew gave us the scope and the environment to debate discuss and determine how to address each and every one of these agenda items just a little bit better than before we met. Ely 2004 reinforced what the earlier Moosejaw, 29 Palms and Chemainus conferences had demonstrated.

We testified in our questionnaires to myriad ideas seen, discussed and believed, that we took back and worked on in our own towns and cities. On the one hand we used more local artists and on the other we brought more international artists in to work with us and with our local artists; we saw how art can lead to more than just a clean up or beautification - it can beckon in economic regeneration and we saw how to optimize that process; we saw how other towns and cities used Murals -in-a-Day [Lompoc 13 and counting] and Brought Murals to Life in theatrical re-enactments [Ely]; we saw how Sheffield Tasmania had pioneered its Nine-Murals-in-a-Week Arts Fest in its new Murals Square and Lindsay brought a hugely successful Farmers' Market to its new town square; we learned of major success in printing and selling murals guides; we learned how a pub in Scotland that is already a 1908 arts and crafts architectural gem is donating its trading surpluses above 5% pa for at least 10 years to the Arts Festival with the main thrust of all its events management there towards the arts; we learned of Arts Alleys and Streetscapes with murals on street lamp posts; we envied and copied Lindsay's

approach to muralisation in derelict downtown areas; we all saw what Chemainus and others were doing with their theatres and repeat visitor attractions.

As such, the overwhelming rationale for belonging to the Global Association was seen, and known in reality, to be its networking potential and its sharing by global rotation of the responsibility to arrange each next event. But each and every town that has so far 'volunteered' to convene has also found that with good guidance from the Founder himself the privilege of undertaking its organization becomes of itself a driver for the better. Goals are set to involve other civic and regional organisations and governmental leaders, and achieved, and fellow travelers from around the globe arrive publicly to declare and show their professional appreciation.

The town itself stands tall and readies itself for its next agendas. It affords a first class opportunity for the host town to rekindle community support and commitment as the Global Conference also affords media opportunities that can be exploited and endorsement for the murals activities by international artists and other murals practitioners from around the world.

And more than a few pondered: What more could we do globally? Yet the consensus seemed to be that it was through bilateral and regional workings that effective joint ventures and shared murals trails and cultural pathways, and the rest, will best flourish. As Canadian Murals Routes brilliantly led from Scarborough Ontario has demonstrated, and the Search Engine by town and by artists and by subject to be found at the Global Association's own website, individual initiatives can and will flourish.... and the Global Association affords the opportunity at its biennial Conferences to share the news as it happens rather than feeling it has to make the news itself.