

Yollocalli Arts Reach

“We definitely see the participants grow as young artists. And whether they go on to art as a career, they’re able to feel more confident about their own expression, about their own style.”

VANESSA SÁNCHEZ

Youth Programs Project Manager
National Museum of Mexican Art



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Focus: Folk and Traditional Arts,
Multidisciplinary
Annual Number Participating: 250
Ages: 13–19
Annual Budget: \$223,000



This past summer, under the guidance of teaching artist Salvador Jiménez, about a dozen teens and young adults from the Yollocalli Arts Reach program spent their days painting a two-story-tall, 30-foot-wide mural on an outside wall of Yollocalli's building in the heart of Chicago's predominantly Latino Pilsen neighborhood. Filled with dramatic images, this mural, titled “Declaration of Immigration,” depicts the fight for immigrant rights in the face of anti-immigrant rhetoric and reminds viewers that America is a nation founded by immigrants.

The mural project epitomizes the approach taken by Yollocalli, the youth initiative of the National Museum of Mexican Art (NMMA). The program—which selects students ages 13 to 19 on the basis of portfolios and interviews—offers numerous in-depth summer and after-school art classes, from mural making, printmaking, and photography to video installation. Whether they are designing a webzine or silk-screening a broadsheet, the participants are also exploring themes and issues that relate to their culture and community.

“It’s a form of empowerment,” explains Gabriel Villa, NMMA youth programs coordinator. “You can use art as a means of social commentary, of protest, as a tool for social change. Basically, the students are learning that through art, they can say something—and something that has substance.”

Before putting pencil to paper or brush to wall, participants disperse into the community to research their projects. For a multimedia project focusing on Quinceañera, the Hispanic coming-of-age celebration for girls, students interviewed female relatives and conducted library research to learn more about the custom and explore issues of gender identity. Prior to developing a mural for a local YMCA, participants consulted with users and staff to learn what the facility means to the neighborhood. In addition to informing the art, these investigations have the added benefit of improving academic skills and strengthening community bonds.

The respected Latino artists who teach the free, bilingual classes—held at Yollocalli and at several satellite locations—serve as mentors and models of professional success. The program promotes academic achievement, job skills, and college attendance, while helping participants embrace their cultural heritage with pride.

Since Yollocalli's inception in 1997, the program's teaching artists have guided students in the creation of more than 30 murals at locations throughout the city, including Midway and O'Hare airports, public transit stations, hospitals, schools, and libraries.

