



Murals: THE GREAT WALLS OF JOLIET

Jeff Huebner

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Since 1991 the city of Joliet, Illinois, has commissioned painters for a series of public murals. Free to use their own styles and follow their particular visions, the artists gave Joliet a diverse and dramatic body of public art that is also a statement of civic pride and a revival of a venerable midwestern tradition. Arrayed with color plates of the murals and accompanied by biographical sketches of the artists, this impressive volume documents the rich ethnic, racial, and cultural heritage that informs the art. An old industrial city thirty-five miles south of Chicago, Joliet has a mixed ethnic population. The murals of Joliet reflect this diversity, featuring the experiences of African Americans, Mexican Americans, Italian Americans, German and Irish immigrants, and the city's Slovenian community. Bold, colorful pieces acknowledge industrial and natural resources, including the Illinois and Michigan Canal, the Des Plaines River, the region's limestone quarries, and the Sauk trail. They pay tribute to the area's farmers as well as to individuals such as labor leader Samuel Gompers and the dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist Katherine Dunham. Above all, "Murals: The Great Walls of Joliet" documents the profound transformation in the local mentality wrought by the development of public art in the city. Underwritten by a community group, Friends of Community Public Art, the Joliet murals project stands as a model for modern municipal patronage, evidence of a population's decision to invest in public art to enrich its environment and express the ideals of the whole community.

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