

Philadelphia Mural Arts Advocates

The [Philadelphia Mural Arts Advocates](#) is a 27-year-old organization whose mission it is to create murals that connect artists to communities. Some 1,500 murals exist in the city and more than 20 percent portray an aspect of African American history or culture.

Project

The project was to curate a collection of Philadelphia's most iconic African American themed murals and create cell phone/podcast audio tours, new guided tours, a website, educational programs and participatory mural events. Mural Arts Advocates worked in partnership with the African American Museum in Philadelphia.

"We hope that this project makes the stories and message behind the murals accessible to new audiences," said Kathryn Ott Lovell, former chief advancement officer at the Mural Arts Program.

Research Into Action Findings Used by Philadelphia Mural Arts Advocates

- People of color are more engaged & growing in population. Arts and culture organizations need to adapt programming and marketing to accommodate changing demographics.
- Marketing is multi-channel. Cultural marketers have to rely on a mix of marketing media to reach consumers and close the sale.

Activities

An advisory committee from the African American Museum in Philadelphia chose the 47 murals for the Albert M. Greenfield African American Iconic Images Collection. The criteria for inclusion were artistic merit, context in the community and educational or historical significance.

Among the murals chosen were ones of "Dr. J." Julius Erving, former Philadelphia 76ers basketball player and successful businessman; North Philadelphia heroes including Dr. Ethel Allen, the first African American city councilwoman; several neighborhood leaders as well as those that tell a common story, such as about urban horsemen, women of jazz, and a transformation from homelessness to a better life.

Project staff prepared an audio tour that includes artists, community members, academics and others discussing the significance of the murals. Ahmire "Questlove" Thompson of the hip hop group "The Roots" narrates the audio tour.

The tour was launched during African American History month in February 2011 with a kickoff event and free, abbreviated trolley tours of select murals. Guided tours were held the last Saturday of each month from the African American Museum. People who bought tickets to the tour also received admission to the African American Museum.

The tour is also available on the Mural Arts [website](#). In addition, the tour can be accessed through podcasts and cell phones and downloadable maps so that visitors and residents can take the tour throughout the city on their own. Mural Arts also launched a new smartphone app for the tour.

Mural Arts staff engaged in significant publicity efforts. For example, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Daily News* featured the project in pull out sections the weekend the project was launched and a local television station ran 30 second public service announcements.

The staff and an educational consultant also developed lesson guides for teachers that are adaptable for K-12 classrooms and held a teacher education seminar on the tour.

Results

- **For the Albert M. Greenfield African American Iconic Images Collection nearly 8,000 people visited the website, 754 downloaded the podcast, 224 downloaded an education guide, 1,424 people accessed the cell phone tour and 680 people participated in a guided trolley tour.**
- **The project represented the Mural Arts Advocates first curatorial collaboration with a museum and first effort to provide schools and parents with a free and in-depth interpretation guide and learning aid.** Those steps helped the organization expand its reach to new partners and audiences and gave it a model for how it might continue to foster community engagement with its collection of murals.
- **The project brought new audiences to the African American Museum in Philadelphia who might not have otherwise come without going on the mural tour.** To capitalize on the new visitors, the museum has begun offering workshops that ties into some of the tour's murals such as one on quilting and another on African dance and drumming.

Challenges

The project was much more time consuming than staff anticipated. A marketing manager devoted almost full time to the project for several months. Staff at Mural Arts and the African American Museum said that the partnership was challenging at times because each organization had different perspectives and needs. For example, Mural Arts staff wanted to include a mural with Abraham Lincoln while museum staff raised concerns about the truth of Lincoln's legacy.

"The desire from Mural Arts was to have a celebratory tone about Abraham Lincoln but that's not necessarily how African Americans feel about him," said Adrienne Whaley, museum educator at the African American Museum who did much of the research for the audio tour.

The mural with Lincoln was eventually included in the tour with a narrative that made clear Lincoln's complex relationships with African Americans.

Project staff also faced challenges in engaging school groups on guided tours as planned because schools typically do not have budgets for these kinds of activities.

When visitors or residents see the mural “Legacy” that depicts the legacy of slavery and abolition, they can use their cellphone or iPod to learn more about its creation and creation.

“...artist Josh Sarantitis chose powerful imagery to remind us of the enduring legacy of slavery and abolition,” says narrator Questlove. “On the left is the deck of a slave ship... where a skull-like African mask hovers, symbolizing the suffering caused by slavery. As you move to the right, the ship morphs into the bright red, white and blue of the American flag, signifying the transition from Africa to America, the grueling road from slavery to freedom. Below the girl are two medallions, featuring abolitionist, scholar and activist Frederick Douglass, and President Abraham Lincoln. Research has shown that Abraham Lincoln had a complex relationship with the moral and political meanings of African American slavery and freedom, and his letters, speeches and behavior over time reveal conflicting beliefs - or personas. Yet, Lincoln fought against the expansion of slavery in the growing United States and worked behind the scenes to ensure the passage of the 13th Amendment, which mandated an end to the slave system.”

“Sarantitis got help from elementary school students who were studying about Lincoln as part of their curriculum,” Questlove continues. “They came up with drawings for the mural.”

Click [here](#) to see the mural and listen to the full audio.

Lessons Learned

- **Create numerous avenues and levels of access so that people can engage with art according to their availability and preferences.** It is critical to develop multiple ways for people to engage from shallow to in-depth, short to long, expert mediated to self-mediated, out in the community to home on the couch. Mural Arts Advocates staff created several types of ways that people could interact with the African American mural collection.
- **Find media and marketing partners to get high visibility for similar efforts.** Well-respected partners can bring greater attention, larger audiences and needed revenue to arts organizations. The Philadelphia Mural Arts Programs partnerships with media organizations such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Daily News* and a local television station provided no-cost, far reaching coverage that brought audiences to the African American Mural Arts project who otherwise would likely have been unaware of it.
- **Seek partners in developing rich, multi-dimensional content and opening avenues to new audiences.** Partners can bring in needed new perspectives and content expertise to a project that can make it a deeper, more engaging experience for audiences. Staff at the African American Museum in Philadelphia provided the content for the audio tour and made sure that it was informed by a nuanced understanding of the neighborhoods in which the mural were located as well as the historical underpinnings. African Americans and African American-led organizations held prominent positions in this project, which provided credibility to new audiences that Mural Arts Advocates was trying to reach.

Next Steps

The Albert M. Greenfield African American Iconic Images Collection will continue to grow as new murals are created. The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program anticipates adding a new mural created in collaboration with poet Sonia Sanchez and a new mural honoring The Roots.

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