

A closer look at some of the lively murals brightening walls across the Bluebonnet region



THESE walls CAN talk

Story by Kristin Finan
Photos by Sarah Beal

THEY ARE THE POPS of color that liven up Main Streets, historic buildings and city parks across the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative service area, which stretches across 3,800 square miles of Central Texas. Behind every bright mural that can be spotted in local cityscapes is a story.

One eye-catching mural pays tribute to a town's juicy famous fruit, while another gives a nod to its community's industrial roots. New murals pop up with some regularity, while older, fading murals can show visitors a side of a city's past. Another plus: The larger-than-life murals are on public display all the time.

"The murals in downtown Brenham have become a

destination for people in the surrounding area and beyond. They are available for viewing 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. From family photos to senior portraits and even car shows, the murals provide a colorful backdrop to capture a memory," said Jenny Van Dorf of the Texas Arts and Music Festival. "Each mural is unique to Brenham and tells a different story."

If you've been looking for some new spots to shoot a selfie or family portrait, or simply want to learn more about the region's bigger-than-life art scene, here are seven outdoor murals that can make for a perfect day trip stop.

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Visitors to Giddings can't miss the massive 15-by-90-foot 'Giddings Pride' mural painted in five days in 2020 by Los Angeles-based artist Matt 'Kiptoe' Dean. The mural is on the wall of Orsag's Furniture, 201 W. Austin St.



Sisters Christina, left, and Jackie Venson and dog, Jack, stop for a selfie at the 'Diving into the Divine' mermaid-themed mural in San Marcos at 202 E. Hopkins St. Jackie might look familiar: She is a popular Austin-based recording artist — a guitarist and singer/songwriter. More on the mural and mermaids, Page 21.

“Giddings Pride”

GIDDINGS

(Shown on previous page)

Los Angeles-based artist Matt “Kiptoe” Dean painted the 15-by-90-foot “Giddings Pride” tribute to the city on the wall of Orsag’s Furniture, 201 W. Austin St. Dime Box Distillery, which helped pay for the artwork, owns the empty lot facing the artwork. The mural, created in late October 2020 over a five-day period, incorporates images relevant to Giddings history such as trains, oil derricks and buffalo.

“It had been many years since a mural had been painted (here), and we thought that one that depicted Giddings heritage would be a source of pride for residents as well as another reason for travelers to stop and stretch their legs,” said Michael Leidel, Dime Box Distillery owner. “Since it was painted, we have seen people photograph quinceañeras, wedding parties, family portraits, classic cars and gleaming motorcycles in front of it.”

The mural was paid for by the City of Giddings, the Giddings Economic Development Corporation and Dime Box Distillery. This was Kiptoe’s first mural in Texas.

Go to YouTube and search for “Kiptoe Giddings mural” to watch some of Kiptoe’s five days of mural painting.



Brenham is home to many murals, including the 2017 ‘Owl Family,’ created by California muralist Jeff Soto.



“Owl Family”

BRENHAM

Jeepers, creepers, where’d you get those peepers? Animal enthusiasts and anyone who enjoys large-scale art won’t want to miss downtown Brenham’s brilliantly hued “Owl Family” mural, where huge-eyed, soulful creatures stare back at their inquisitive visitors. Created by renowned muralist Jeff Soto as part of the Texas Arts and Music Festival in Brenham in 2017, the mural stands four stories tall on the back of the historic JH Faske Building, 114 E. Alamo St., facing Commerce Street.

Many colorful murals featuring animals, Brenham-centric icons and other striking images adorn walls on Commerce and adjacent streets.

“We know this creates excitement downtown and has visitors returning to see what’s new,” said Jenny Van

Dorf, a member of the arts festival board. “We have seen the vital importance over the last year of something that can be enjoyed 365 days a year. Even while folks were staying socially distanced, they were able to walk around downtown and take in the beautiful colors and murals.”

The festival is about more than downtown art. “We provide funding for different programs that encourage and support students in their efforts to pursue art and music education,” Van Dorf said.

The annual Texas Arts and Music Festival is Oct. 16-17 this year. It is free and open to the public. Get information about the festival at texasartsandmusicfestival.com, and look for information on the Art Walk on the visitbrenhamtexas.com website.

Watch Soto’s three days of Brenham owl mural painting on vimeo.com/239538253.



Bastrop is an official ‘Bird City,’ so it’s apropos that the mural at 1200 Willow St. features hummingbirds. It was painted in 2020 by, from left, Maria Montoya Stayton, Theresa Dawson and Jeffrey Stayton. *Courtesy of Maria Montoya Stayton*

“A Charm of Hummingbirds”

BASTROP

Send your heart aflutter at this mural, “A Charm of Hummingbirds,” in Fisherman’s Park, 1200 Willow St., in Bastrop. The mural commemorates the city’s 2020 designation by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and Audubon Texas as one of four Bird City Texas-certified communities. Nearly a dozen rainbow-hued

“Dive into the Divine”

SAN MARCOS

Thanks in part to more than 200 springs at the headwaters of the San Marcos River — and mostly to the Aquarena Springs theme park that operated there from 1951 to 1994 — mermaids may be the most beloved mascots in this bustling college city.

For several decades, the Aquamaids donned fancy swimwear and even mermaid tails to perform graceful underwater shows for tourists who filled the park’s glass-bottom boats.

If you want to snap a picture with a mermaid, stop by the Root Cellar Catering Co., 202 E. Hopkins St., where the vibrant “Dive into the Divine” mural by artist Morgan Haberle Egan of San Marcos and fine art and sign painter Jana Swec of Austin reminds passersby to “Keep San Marcos Beautiful.”

The 19-by-14-foot mural was completed in 2016 as part of the City of San Marcos Mural Arts Program, paid for by hotel occupancy tax collections. The program provides artists with grants and design assistance to paint murals on private property throughout the city. “Murals can enliven an otherwise drab alley or parking lot and add to the character and sense of place in a community, and can also beautify an area by covering and preventing graffiti,” the program’s website states.

Other can’t-miss art sightings in San Marcos include the vibrant underwater scenes by San Marcos artist Mabel Sirup in



Above, a mermaid can’t be missed in this San Marcos mural. Mermaids are a popular icon in the city, in part due to the ‘Aquamaids’ who swam in Aquarena Springs theme park there for more than four decades.

In a photo circa 1952, Margaret Russell feeds fish before her underwater performance at Aquarena Springs. She and her husband, Don, came from the Weeki Wachee Springs underwater tourist attraction in Florida to help at Aquarena Springs. She was one of the original performers at Weeki Wachee, which opened in 1947. *Courtesy of San Marcos Convention and Visitor’s Bureau*

Children’s Park, also a project of the mural arts program, and the Mermaid March, a public art project from the San Marcos Arts Commission that showcases 10 mermaid sculptures, each 7

feet tall, around town.

At Spring Lake, where the mermaids swam, the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment has been conducting research since 2012. Visitors to that Texas State University facility can still see the pristine waters from glass-bottom boats. Get information and make reservations at meadowscenter.txstate.edu (click on the “Explore Spring Lake” tab.)

See more of San Marcos’ art by going to the Art Map on the sanmarcostx.gov website. Under the Community link, look under Arts.

hummingbirds fly across the mural that was created by artist Maria Montoya Stayton of Bastrop in partnership with artists Theresa Dawson of Red Rock and Jeffrey Stayton of Bastrop.

The 25-by-8½-foot mural was painted in August 2020, “the hottest month of the year during a pandemic,” Montoya Stayton said. It features ruby-throated, Rufous and black-chinned hummingbirds, which can be spotted in Bastrop. The mural was commissioned by the Bastrop County Audubon Society in celebration of the Bird City designation.

“During a time of pandemic, when one of the few things people could do was to walk or hike outside, this mural provided the community an opportunity to watch as it developed,” Montoya Stayton said.

The artists selected an abstract composition that is “colorful, can be seen from far away, and blends in nicely with the environment. ... It is also interactive and allows people to hold the trumpet plant in the mural,” she said. Don’t miss the whimsical, animal-themed mural on the flip side of the building, either, painted by K.M. Fritz.

“An outdoor mural is intended to stay fresh amid the elements for many years,” Montoya Stayton said. After preliminary treatment, she uses professional grade acrylic paint and varnish, then tops that with “sacrificial” varnish to guard against graffiti. “If the steps are not taken, murals will not last,” she said.

Get more information about Fisherman’s Park at visitbastrop.com (search for “Fisherman’s Park”) or about bird-watching in Bastrop (search for “birding in Bastrop.”)

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“Quilts ... History in the Making”

LA GRANGE

Housed in two historic buildings at 140 W. Colorado St. in La Grange, the nonprofit Texas Quilt Museum is dedicated to showcasing both antique and contemporary quilt art. The museum also has a must-visit mural called “Quilts ... History in the Making.”

This intricately detailed 13-by-85-foot outdoor mural depicts 15 traditional 19th-century quilts. It was designed by Austin artist Duana Gill and painted in 2011 by muralist Brent McCarthy, who lives in the Hill Country. The mural’s centerpiece is the museum’s emblem quilt — a red, white and blue Founders Star.

“The mural was one of the best things we did,” museum manager Julie Maffei said. “It’s a wonderful complement to our one-of-a-kind period garden.”

The colorful garden was patterned after a typical “city garden” in a Central Texas town in the 1890s, when the museum’s buildings were erected. It is called the “Grandmother’s Flower Garden” in tribute to a Depression-era quilt pattern that is still beloved today. Each year the quilt mural is touched up by McCarthy to eliminate stains and fading, Maffei said.

Get more information at texasquiltmuseum.org.

“Welcome to Luling”

LULING

Luling loves to show pride in its famous watermelons, from the fanfare around its annual summer Watermelon Thump to the local favorite fruit in shops and restaurants around town. It makes sense that the “Welcome to Luling” mural at the corner of East Davis Street and South Magnolia Avenue would feature a bright red truck loaded to the brim with, yes, watermelons.

The 19-by-18-foot mural was created in 2011 by Luling artist Joshua Farrell. It was commissioned by Luling Main Street, an organization of local business owners committed to revitalizing the Main Street District.

You can time your visit to Luling with the Watermelon Thump, always the last full weekend of every June since 1954. Or, you may simply revel in a relaxed day trip or weekend escape that, in addition to mural sightings, may include antiquing, shopping boutiques, enjoying barbecue or sampling produce, including watermelon, at the Farmers Market at 700-798 FM 1322.

Look closely at the mural to get some hints at Luling’s heritage: Learn more at lulingmainstreet.com/projects.php.



Historic murals

Preserving visions of Texas history

IN THE 1930S and early 1940s, a striking feature was added to the walls of hundreds of federal post offices across the country: oversized colorful murals depicting life in America. The paintings were commissioned as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal to provide work for struggling artists and to boost American morale as the adversities of the Great Depression began to lift.

Hundreds of the murals remain on display in post offices, including many in Texas. Most of the paintings are on canvas attached to the wall, but some are frescoes painted directly onto plaster. Six of the Depression-era post office murals are in Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative’s service area.

The mural artists were chosen through an anonymous competitive process run by the U.S. Department of the Treasury. About 1,400 dramatic murals, averaging 12-by-5-feet, were created for post office buildings in more than 1,300 cities. Artists were paid an average of \$700 per mural.

Artists were instructed to depict realistic scenes of ordinary people and to avoid controversial topics, according to the book, “The Texas Post Office Murals: Art for the People,” by Philip Parisi, published by Texas A&M University Press in 2004. Government guidelines and themes for the murals were provided to each artist, with an emphasis placed on scenes of local interest and events.

Across Texas, murals featured everything from the Alamo and other landmarks to American Indian life to jobs, such as oil-field laborers or cowboys with cattle. While some of the original murals have been lost or are in need of repair after post office renovations and demolitions, there is renewed interest in preserving these pieces of the past. The U.S. Postal Service even released a line of stamps featuring five post office murals in 2019.

The post office murals were designed as art for the masses, and these six are well worth visiting.

— Kristin Finan



GIDDINGS 'Cowboys Receiving the Mail' by Texas artist Otis Dozier, 1939. This mural showcases cowboys at a rural mailbox opening their mail, including a package of new red cowboy boots. The mural was intended to emphasize the mail's importance in daily rural life. 279 E. Austin St.



LA GRANGE 'Horses' by San Francisco artist Tom E. Lewis, 1939. There is little public record about this mural, which reflects a rural scene of pasture with cattle and a farmhouse in the background and horses in foreground. 113 E. Colorado St.



LOCKHART 'The Pony Express Station' by Scottish-born John Law Walker, 1939. This piece includes a Pony Express rider changing horses while, in the background, a wagon train of settlers and a group of American Indians head into town. 217 W. Market St.



SMITHVILLE 'The Law — Texas Rangers' by Texas artist Minette Teichmueller, 1939. A mounted Texas Ranger confronts two suspected bandits with a box of loot under an oak tree. 400 Main St.



CALDWELL 'Indians Moving' by California artist Suzanne Scheuer, Burlison County Courthouse, 1939. This mural, depicting the migration of nomadic American Indians of the Plains, was restored in 1989 and moved to the courthouse after demolition of the local post office. 100 W. Buck St.



ELGIN 'Texas Farm' by Texas artist Julius Woeltz, 1940. Agrarian life is documented in this colorful mural of farm scenes showing workers picking corn, harvesting wheat and storing grain. 21 N. Ave. C.



“Welcome to Smithville, Train 286”

SMITHVILLE

Smithville, known for its railroad history, offers a mural of a barreling train to welcome visitors to town. The “Welcome to Smithville, Train 286” mural, 217 Main St. at Loop 230, was painted in 1976 by a local Presbyterian minister. The train art is painted on the side of a building that used to be the Bayer Pharmacy and now houses a law firm.

Smithville works to prioritize the arts, from nearly a dozen stages and venues for live music and theatrical productions to three art galleries. The city recently opened the new home for the James H. Long Railroad Park and Museum, at 106 N.E. First St. The building also houses the city visitor center and chamber of commerce.

There are other photo-worthy murals in town, including the rainbow-adorned sprawling piece on an exterior wall of Smithville Elementary School at Bishop and N.E. Seventh streets. That mural was featured in the 1998 Sandra Bullock film, “Hope Floats.”

Get more information about the city’s murals at smithvilleculturaldistrict.com/murals/.

Railroads figure prominently in Smithville’s history, although a mix of murals can be found around town.