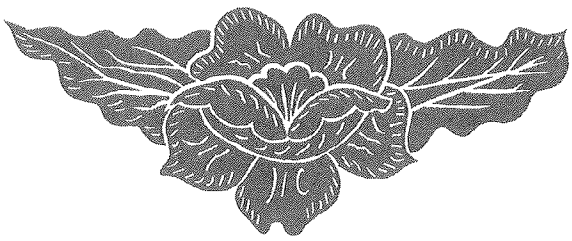
Part 3:

EXPRESSIVE TRADITIONS AND IDENTITY



Parte 3:

ARTE POPULAR E IDENTIDAD

TEACHER INTRODUCTION

People along the border express themselves in many ways: through music, dance, painting, theater, and literature. In this region, traditional expressions include ballads that recount historical events, murals or improvised street plays that are public statements about social injustice, and lowrider cars that proudly showcase the presence of a vibrant Chicano culture and identity.

In this section, students will view Part 3 of the video, which introduces artists from both sides of the border. Carlos Callejo is a muralist from El Paso. La Brigada por la Paz (The Brigade for Peace) is the name of a group of *cholo* muralists from Juárez. Lowrider car artist Romy Frías talks about the importance of his art in his life. The street theater group, El Taller Universitario de Teatro, performs a segment of their improvisational play, *"Mexicali a secas."* The Layton Family, *conjunto* musicians, discuss their family's musical history, and Carmen Cristina Moreno sings a *corrido* (ballad).

A charting exercise helps students to organize information about these traditional expressions. Additional exercises include an excerpt from an interview with Romy Frías, in which he explains how his life changed following his involvement with the Slow and Low lowrider club. Students examine a *corrido* and are encouraged to write their own improvisational skit. This section includes two reading pieces: the first narrates the story of the musical duo El Palomo y El Gorrión, and the second summarizes the history and contemporary significance of murals along the border.

Suggestions to prepare for exercises in this section:
Corridos: You may wish to provide more examples of *corridos* for your students. See the *corrido* "In Honor of Kennedy" in the Appendix or consult publications by Américo Paredes and Vicente Mendoza in the Bibliography for more examples.
Theater: Bring in newspaper clippings about current local problems and issues to give students ideas for their skit topic.

By the end of this section, students will:

- *recognize expressive traditions as an important part of people's personal, family, and community lives.*
- *learn how expressive traditions reflect contemporary social and political issues.*

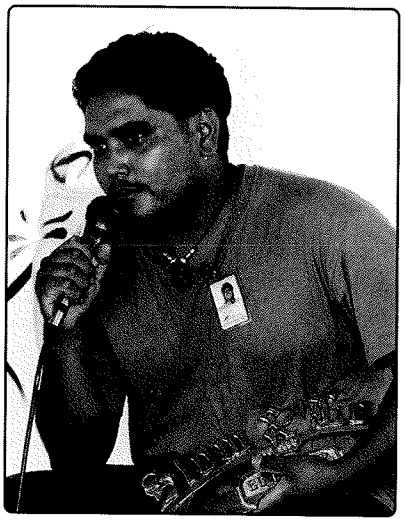
Discussion Quotation

Read the following quotation, and discuss the questions that follow:

The truth is the truth. Where there are problems, there are problems. Whether you put it on a wall or the hood of a car, we are trying to make a story, tell the truth, let everybody know. Some people do it one way, our way is through paint. This is the way we choose to express ourselves. It's all about expression.

Romy Frías, lowrider artist, El Paso, Texas

How can people express truth, or problems, through art? What questions does this quotation raise for you? Write down your questions. Look back at your questions following the video viewing.



Romy Frías, a lowrider from El Paso, Texas, holds a hood ornament with the name of his car club, Slow and Low. • Romy Frías, un lowrider de El Paso, Texas, muestra una decoración para su carro con el nombre de su club "Low and Slow". *Photo courtesy/foto cortesía Smithsonian Institution*

Video Viewing

Watch **Expressive Traditions and Identity,** Part 3 of the video. Discuss the following:

- Were any of your earlier questions answered by the video?
- What new questions did the video raise for you?
- How do the experiences of Carlos Callejo differ from those of the members of La Brigada por la Paz?
- What are some of the similarities between the creation of a lowrider car and the painting of a mural?
- How have family and history influenced the experiences of Carmen Cristina Moreno and Norfilia Layton?

EXERCISES

1. Art Chart

Make a list of the different forms of artistic expression in the video. Create a chart that compares and contrasts the types of expression. Use the following categories for comparison, and add others if you feel the necessity.

- Type: oral/written/sung/visual (painted, sketched, etc.)
- Authorship: composed by one artist/composed by group
- Theme: historical/social statement/entertainment/survival
- Meaning to artist(s): group or family solidarity/expression of injustice or social problem/statement of identity

Discuss how the chart emphasizes the differences and similarities among the forms of traditional artistic expression along the border.

2. *Corridos:* The Singing of a Story

Corridos are musical ballads that tell stories about events of significance to a place. A *corrido* interprets, celebrates, and dignifies events already familiar to its audience. Themes range from love to commentary on a political situation. The narrative may have an epic flavor that concerns an heroic figure, for example a bandit, a general, or a president. It may be the story of an ordinary person recognized locally by the community. Like the Virgin of Guadalupe's image, the events told in a *corrido* form are symbols of value to the community.

A *corrido* follows a traditional poetic form:

- Quatrain verse – 4 lines
- Rhyming pattern – A B C B (see second verse of the *corrido* in Spanish, page 90)
- Some have a 4-line refrain.

The content of the *corrido* also follows a standard format:

1) Formal opening – Initial call of the *corridista* (balladeer) to the public.
2) Introduction – Setting the scene. Often states the place, date, and name of the main character of the *corrido* (see verses #1 and #2).
3) Action – The arguments of the protagonist as reported by the narrator through face-to-face conversations (see verse #2, #4, #6). The story is told in the third person, by an observer.

Gregorio Cortez is a border hero from the Lower Río Grande region. The corrido named after him made him famous in the region. ● Gregorio Cortez es un héroe de la frontera en la región del río Bravo. El corrido que lleva su nombre lo hizo famoso en la región. *Photo courtesy/foto cortesía University of Illinois Press (Américo Paredes' personal collection)*

4) The message (see #9).

5) The farewell of the protagonist (see #10).

6) Formal close (*despedida*) – The farewell of the *corridista* (see #11).

Corridos vary from region to region, and most *corridos* don't employ all elements. On the border, the formal opening is not as important as the formal closing, the *despedida*. Often the *corridista* will jump to the action, skipping the introduction.

Certain standard phrases, such as *"Ya con ésta me despido"* (With this I say farewell) and *"Vuela, vuela palomita"* (Fly, fly, little dove), often signal the *despedida* (see #10 and #11).

In the video, Carmen Cristina Moreno sings a *corrido* that is set during the Mexican Revolution (1910-17). She explains that the song has a special meaning for her because her father fought in the Revolution. Carmen Cristina sings the *corrido* in Spanish and then translates for the English-speaking audience. Here are the words to the *corrido*:

1. He said farewell to Allende
At exactly twenty-one years of age;
He left pleasant memories
With the people and the *rurales* (federal troops).

2. Arnulfo was sitting down,
When a lieutenant happens to pass by;
The lieutenant says to him, "Listen, why are you staring at me?"
"Looking is very natural."

3. The lieutenant was very angry,
And he struck him in the face;
With his pistol in his hand,
He threatened him with death.

4. Arnulfo rose to his feet,
Calling the lieutenant down:
"Listen, friend, don't go away.
My reply is yet to come."

At the Festival, Carmen Cristina stops in the middle of the *corrido*. This is how the song concludes:

5. They started shooting at each other,
They were fighting face to face;
With his pistol Arnulfo
Shot the lieutenant three times.

6. But, "Oh," the lieutenant says,
Almost with his last breath,
"Listen, friend, don't go away.
Come back and finish me off."

7. Arnulfo returned,
To put a bullet through his forehead,
But as he turned around,
The lieutenant shot him down.

8. Arnulfo, very badly wounded,
Was taken away in a car;
When he got to the hospital,
He was near his death bed.

9. How admirable are the men
Who fight to the death face to face,
Each one of them with his pistol,
Defending his right!

10. Fly, fly, little dove,
Go light on those wheat fields;
Go take the news to Lupita
That Arnulfo González is dead;
He took a scalp along with him,
That of the lieutenant of the *rurales*.

11. Now with this I say farewell
To civilians and to officials;
This is the end of the ballad
Of the lieutenant and González.

As a class, or in small groups, compose your own ballad, either about a person or an event on the U.S.-Mexico border, or from your own community. You might borrow music from a song you know and perform it for the class. Listen to Carmen Cristina's song again for ideas.

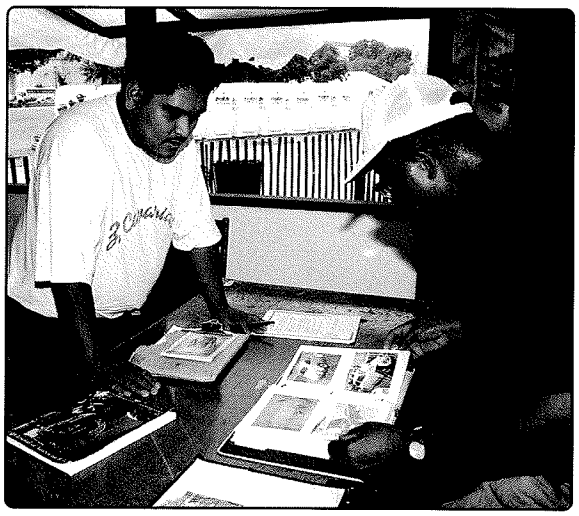
3. Lowriders: A Statement from the Streets

At the Festival of American Folklife, Romy Frías of El Paso, Texas, told the following story about how he joined the Slow and Low car club.

> *I played football in high school, and I suffered a very crippling knee injury. This injury stopped me from practicing. My life was very crushing to me. I turned to the gangs; they also have a very high profile, and I was by no means as wimpy as the coaches made me out to be. So there I was, a soldier of the gangs for a while, and I saw where that was taking me. I didn't really see myself as that kind of a follower. So for about two, three months*

I went through the painstaking task of disassociating myself from the gangs around the city. Now I was a target for the jocks and for the gang members.

Little by little, I started seeing the cars cruising around. You always dream about having a car like that. I had an '87 Escort, so I started putting my attention toward my vehicle. I did after-school jobs, and what little money I was making, rather than spend it foolishly taking the boys out to drink beer, I started putting it into my car. And little by little, I started attracting the attention of the car clubs.



***Romy Frías shares his lowrider scrapbook with Festival visitors.** ◉ **Romy Frías muestra su álbum lowrider a los visitantes del Festival.** Photo by/foto de Rick Vargas, courtesy/cortesía Smithsonian Institution*

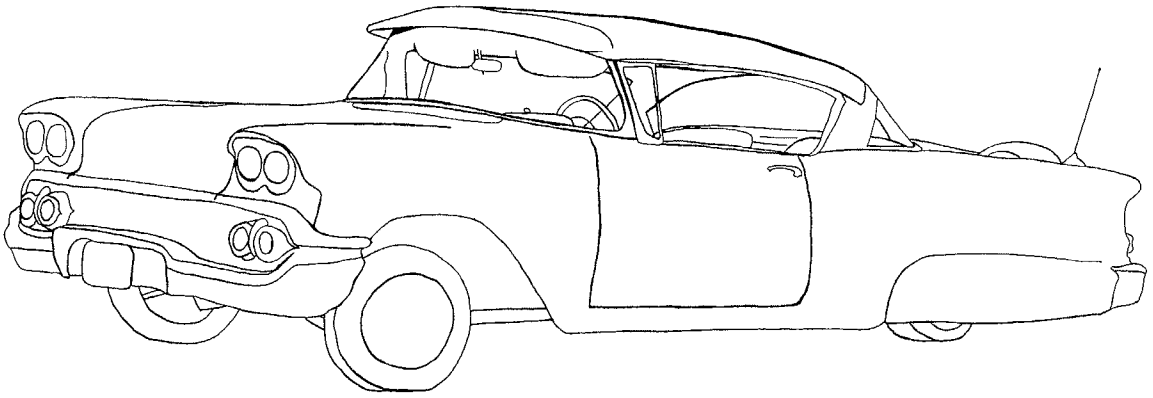
One weekend, I was just minding my own business, following the cruising scene. I was approached by a number of gang members, both from my ex-gang and other gangs that were allied with them. The gang members pulled me out of the car — they literally pulled me out of the window of the car — and told me I wasn't going to go home tonight and that they'd have fun cruising my new ride. Immediately upon seeing that, Slow and Low car club members pulled around me. It wasn't so much a show of force; they just showed up. Slow and Low showed up that time with 40 members, 40 different vehicles, mostly VWs, some mini-trucks, and a few traditionals. This was indeed something that the gangs would have to reckon with.

When the gangs saw that, they let me go. A couple of the board members, the leaders if you will, of Slow and Low, came up to me and shook my hand. "Hi, Romy, we've known you for a while, and we saw you are interested in lowriding. We were wondering if you would like to hook up with us, 'cause we think you have come a long way." They didn't tell the gang members anything. All they did was show up and introduce themselves to me. Their very presence was intimidating enough for the gang members to leave me alone.

Of course, the next couple of years would bring threats and gossip, but they were there for me. In return, I've given them the skills that I have learned. I will never forget that night. I was terrified. I didn't know if I was going to go home. The guys were known as knifers. They were known to bring weapons. Slow and Low showed up, and it was a unique way that they defused the situation. It showed the responsibility of the members not to bring themselves down to the mentality of the gang members,

but rather just to show up and to get me involved. It effectively eradicated the whole presence of the gang, completely.

- Romy's story shows how a lowrider club can act as a positive alternative to joining a gang. What activities in your community might serve the same purpose?
- Have you ever been in a potentially dangerous situation like the one Romy describes? How was the situation resolved? How would you tell the story?
- Design your own lowrider car, using colors, symbols, and other elements to express your identity or that of your group. You can use the following drawing as an outline.



4. Theater Improvisation

Along the U.S.-Mexico border, theater often expresses issues such as injustice, discrimination, poverty, and pollution. The border theater group, El Taller Universitario de Teatro, uses their play, *"Mexicali a secas,"* to point out injustices in the *maquiladora* industry, as you saw in the brief excerpt of their performance on the video.

- Break into small groups. Pick a topic that is a problem in your area. Select different characters to represent different points of view.
- Possible topics include:
  strained race relations in a nearby high school
  pollution in a local water supply
  homelessness
  drugs
  migration
- Create a skit to dramatize the problem. Perform it for your class with simple costumes and props. Or record it as a radio play, and broadcast it over the school loudspeaker system.

READING

THE STORY OF THE DUO EL PALOMO Y EL GORRIÓN

The following excerpts are from Ingratos ojos míos: Miguel Luna y la historia de El Palomo y El Gorrión, *the story of two brothers, Miguel and Cirilo Luna Franco. The brothers were born in El Sáuz, a ranch in the border state of Nuevo León in northern Mexico. This is the story of their musical career as the duo El Palomo y El Gorrión. The story is told by Miguel, "El Gorrión," and written down by Guillermo Berrones.*

Here come The Birds! From childhood, that's how we have been known in La Chona [the name of the small town near the ranch where they lived] and everywhere we have been since. Father says that he called me Gorrión [Sparrow] because I looked like those little birds that have very few feathers when they are born. I was bald at birth, and so he baptized me Gorrión. Palomo [Dove] was chubby when he was born, like a dove with a fat breast, and that's why Father gave him that name. To this day, when we are around, people say, "Here come the Pajaros [Birds]." It makes me think of my childhood, my town's people and the land we come from.

When they were young, Father, Ramoncito [a friend of the family] and my mother formed a musical group and played for parties. They would return with goats, pigs and beans, which was how they were paid.

The truth is that Father was out of tune, but he liked to sing and he was stubborn. We learned to sing from my mother. We started performing in the ranch schools. One school would recommend us to other schools. That's how I started going from one ranch to another. Eventually we went to Mexico City. [The father took the three sons to Mexico City to see a doctor about Palomo's eye, which he had hurt in an accident.] We sang in the streets, in markets and on buses. Father realized singing brought in cash, which meant we could keep looking for doctors.

One day, Father decided to go to Cuernavaca. We went with trip fare only. The brightly lit signs greeted us as we arrived. I was traumatized from that time on. Whenever I saw the image of those lights, I was overcome with sadness. It meant arriving in an unknown town and singing, singing and singing. If we arrived at night we would go directly to the bars, because we had to get enough money for the hotel.

If the town had a radio station, Father would ask them to let us sing. They would say no but he would insist stubbornly until we got a chance. Then he would ask for a letter that stated we had sung at the station.

One day while singing on a bus, we met a man who was the representative for several important music groups. He heard us and said, "Get off." We were afraid but we got off. He said, "Would you like to record?" "Yes, but we have to talk to our father." "I'll give you my card and you tell your father to bring you to this address." [Thus, El Palomo y El Gorrión began their recording career.]

The golden age of El Palomo y El Gorrión was in the 1960s. We filled the plazas in Torreón, Nuevo Laredo and

many others. We also went to ranches lit with oil lamps and we sang without amplification. To this day we keep in touch with the ranch and with the country folk. We return to visit and to be together. We have not forgotten our origins.

El Palomo and El Gorrión, a musical duo from Monterrey, Nuevo León, sing rancheras and corridos at the Festival in Washington. ● ***El Palomo y El Gorrión, un dúo musical de Monterrey, Nuevo León, canta rancheras y corridos en el Festival en Washington.***

Photo by/foto de Jeff Tinsley, courtesy/cortesía Smithsonian Institution

QUESTIONS

1. Where did El Palomo y El Gorrión learn to sing? Is family history important to this duo? In what ways?

2. Why do you think El Gorrión was traumatized by the bright lights of Cuernavaca?

READING MURALS

BY KARIN HAYES

Murals are an excellent way to pass on some of these traditions, some of these legends, and some of these stories. Murals are effective because they are in public places, accessible to everyone, and so they reach literally thousands upon thousands of people. And so they are a way to bring some of this identity, some of this history to the new generations.

Carlos Callejo
muralist and 1993 Festival of American Folklife participant

We get people to participate in painting murals and to help redirect violence between barrios. *They are promoting peace, culture, tradition.*

Alonso Encina
muralist with La Brigada por la Paz and 1993 Festival of American Folklife participant

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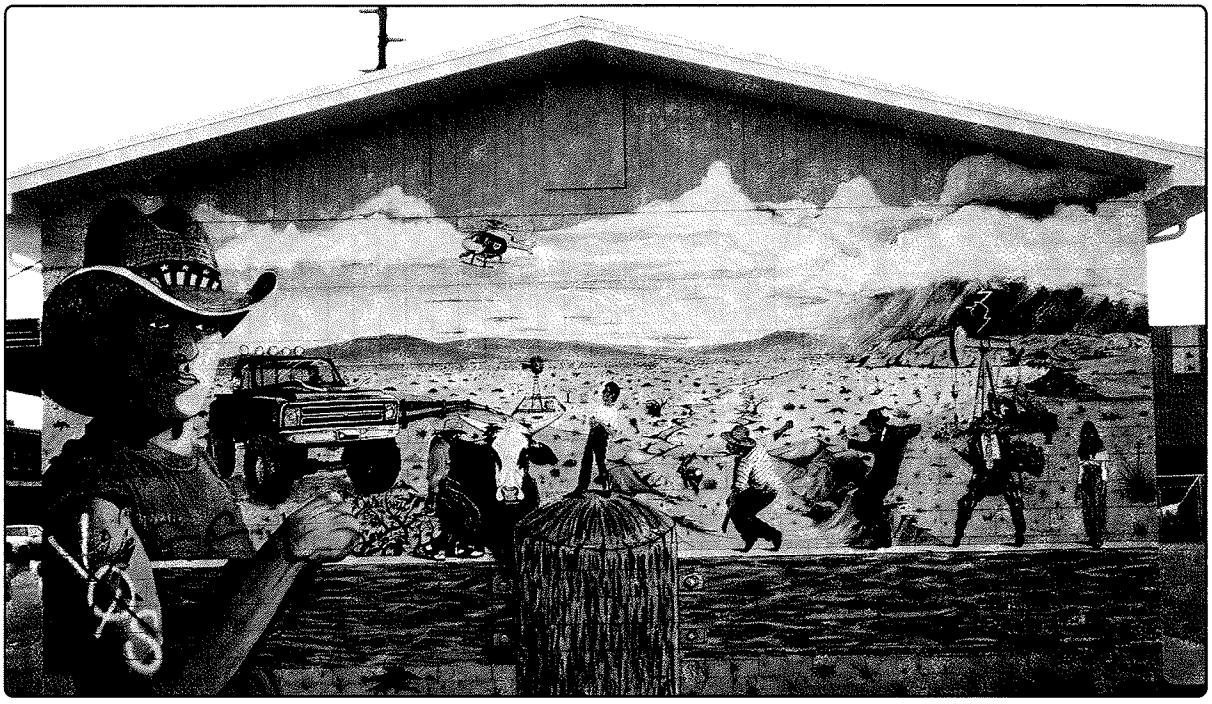
Muralism is a form of painting traditionally done on walls. Mexico has a long tradition of muralism. Mexican muralism dates back to pre-Colombian (pre-1492) times with paintings on temples, pyramids, and palaces done by the Tolteca, Mayan, and other Native American societies. When the Spanish invaded Mexico in the 16th century, they discovered these murals. The Spaniards often employed Native Americans to paint murals, adorning their church walls with religious themes. During this early colonial period, Native Americans were forbidden from painting their own traditions and lifestyles in murals.

Although muralism in Mexico did not receive much attention by the upper classes in the 17th and 18th centuries, it continued to flourish as popular art, often in signs on store fronts and bars. It was not until the Mexican Revolution began in 1910 that ordinary people seized the walls to make political statements in public places.

In the 20th century, muralism was led by three great muralists — Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco. The work of these *tres grandes* (three great ones) provided a record of Mexico's history, politics, culture, and a voice of the people. In addition, these *tres grandes* influenced muralists of the United States government-funded Federal Arts Project in the 1930s.

During the Depression of the 1930s, more than 2,500 murals in the United States were funded by the government through the Works Progress Administration, Federal Arts Project. Mural artists sponsored by the project were often among the large number of people left unemployed by the Depression. In the 1930s, murals depicted agricultural life, the history of pioneers and Native Americans in the United States, immigrants, farming, and labor. Although many American artists of the Depression wanted to include the lessons of the *tres grandes* in their work, it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that a strong Chicano muralist movement occurred. Gaining a voice through the Civil Rights Act, affirmative action, and media attention to minority issues, the Chicano working class sought to address issues such as job discrimination and the prohibition against speaking Spanish in schools through murals on neighborhood walls. Carlos Callejo, a contemporary Chicano muralist who came of age in the late 1960s, explains:

Mural painting is more of a community art project. The



"El Chuco y Que" mural by Carlos Callejo, El Paso, Texas. ● Mural "El Chuco y Que" de Carlos Callejo, El Paso, Texas.
Photo by/foto de Michael Stone

artist basically becomes a tool to portray the struggles, the aspirations, the needs of that particular community.

Artists of the Chicano mural movement were often self-taught sign painters, house painters, college art students, and graffiti artists. Although these artists had different backgrounds, they used murals as positive affirmations of their Mexican heritage. The artists used murals to involve the community, moving art outside of museums and into the daily lives of people. Under the direction of an artist, community members often designed and painted murals themselves.

Chicano artists paint murals for many different reasons, many of which come from within the community itself. In El Paso, Texas, muralists have chosen topics that reflect problems in their community — homelessness, AIDS, drugs, gang violence, illiteracy — as well as pride in family, community, and cultural heritage. Since the 1960s and 1970s, in El Paso as well as in Los Angeles, Chicago, and other cities across the United States, many artists in Latino neighborhoods have expressed their hopes, dreams, and fears through murals.

Murals affect people on different levels, from the passer-by who watches the painting evolve, to the community member who participates in the planning and painting, to neighbors and outsiders who live in or visit the community. As a public form of art and communication, murals express cultural heritage and identity, and pride in the community. Murals are powerful tools to teach onlookers about history and legends, and to create an awareness of social and political problems.

For additional reading, consult the bibliography in the Appendix.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is a favorite image in murals, like this one in a neighborhood in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. ● *La Virgen de Guadalupe es una imagen popular para murales como éste en un barrio de Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua.*
Photo by/foto de Olivia Cadaval

QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important to find ways to express identity and cultural values? How can a mural help you tell a story about your community?

2. If you were to paint a mural about your own identity, what images would you use?

EXERCISES

1. Create a mural as a class.
   - Decide on a general theme: sites in your town, city; life as a teenager; the environment; an historical event; community issues, etc.
   - Choose images to represent that theme.
   - Sketch the idea on paper, and then transfer it to large butcher paper (the size of the mural).
   - Paint the mural. Make sure all class members are involved in some way; this is a group effort.

2. After creating a mural with your class, plan a smaller mural about yourself. Use the images you thought about for question 2.

3. Find a mural in your community. What does the mural represent? Who painted the mural? If possible, contact the muralist and ask if you can interview him/her. Why did the muralist select the themes he/she chose?

Summary of Part 3
EXPRESSIVE TRADITIONS *and* IDENTITY

Ideas in this section:

- People can express themselves in many different ways through traditional arts.
- Art can point out social problems and political issues.
- Art can be used for many purposes, even to prevent people from joining gangs.

What's Next?

In the next section, on **Occupations and Identity,** students will learn:

- *how the presence of the border has affected the working lives of its residents.*
- *how traditional occupations along the border have evolved over the years to accommodate new situations.*