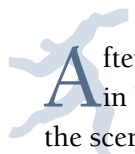


The Walls Have Voices

How one mural painter uses trompe l'oeil — “trick of the eye — to capture memories of the past, and reinvigorate the hearts of communities.

 After he finished a colossal mural that recreated a gentler, more elegant era in Bucyrus, Ohio, artist Eric Grohe returned and added another person to the scene. He painted in a young woman in a white summer dress, with a baby carriage, holding her head in her hand as she viewed a telegram.

The mural, *Great American Crossroads*, had transformed a blotched gray cement wall and gravel parking lot into a visually dramatic entrance to the city and a welcoming space for concerts and private and public celebrations. The scene depicted stately old buildings, demolished or burned over the years, that people in town had loved. With the final project unveiled, Grohe was signing autographs when an elderly woman approached and thanked him for putting the Western Union office in the picture. She told him she had gone to that office during World War II to get the telegram telling her that her husband was missing. She was pregnant at the time. Some days later, after giving birth to their child, she returned, pushing the baby carriage, to get the telegram saying her husband had been killed in action.

“The point was she had been so optimistic when she got that first message, so full of hope for her husband,” Grohe said, “and then she got that final notice.” Grohe was deeply moved by her story, and the woman was touched by the change he made in the picture. “That’s the kind of heartfelt story we want to build into these things,” Grohe says. “The images have to be powerful as art, not just civic reminiscence, but you want real stories about real people.” And of course the woman became one of his many life-long friends.

Art for Community Transformation

Eric Grohe’s murals are an extraordinary blend of history, investigative reporting, hard labor, soaring talent and emotional impact painted large by an

artist whose vision is nothing less than human connection and community transformation.

In Bucyrus, Ohio, a city of some 13,000 residents, Grohe and his wife, Kathy, an artist who manages the couple's business matters, got to know the past, the people, and the daily rhythm of the life. In all their work, they learn the often-overlooked details, joys, dangers, sorrows and idiosyncrasies of communities and workplaces. And that information, along with the compelling personal stories they inevitably hear, informs Grohe's artistic conceptualizations. Bucyrus was one of the country's great intersections—an old stagecoach road from the east coast to Chicago, and a north-south road linking southern Ohio with Lake Erie crossed in Bucyrus. A trolley line from Columbus to Cleveland also passed through. The Bucyrus Area Community Foundation and Bucyrus Downtown Revitalization Committee knew of Grohe's work in Steubenville, Ohio and invited him to look at a deteriorated present-day site. What Grohe envisioned was art that would change and challenge—a visually rewarding spot with an emotional appeal to nostalgia for the past and promise

for the future. Every horse, every person over the years, had used these roads to get from one big chunk of America to another, Grohe muses, and the city was, literally, a Great American Crossroads. "We interviewed everyone in sight," he remembers. "There was a group of



The wall in downtown Bucyrus, Ohio, before Grohe's transformation.



*"Great American Crossroads" -- Bucyrus, Ohio. 34' x 130', acrylic on prepared cement block
Dominating the main square of town, this once gray, soiled wall and gravel parking lot have become both a dramatic entrance to the city as well as a backdrop for numerous concerts and civic events.*

about 30 gentlemen, all retired, who had breakfast together every day. They had a club. They called themselves the Rusty Zippers. They all had strong individual opinions, and I had the privilege of talking with them all about what should go up. A consensus began to build, and I agreed with it. It fit the conditions.”

People agreed they missed some beautiful, irreplaceable old buildings that had disappeared over time. One was a hotel. “Henry Ford got off the train and stayed in that hotel along with other prominent industrialists and inventors, on their way to the funeral of President Harding,” Grohe discovered in his research. “President Harding may have stayed there himself. We learned that he was quite playful—we hear lot of things that don’t end up in history books. People wanted those buildings back, and they wanted the square the way it used it used to look at the turn of the last century. We put it back.”

Eric and Kathy Grohe studied old photographs and continued to talk to people. They found a host of historical characters to populate the visual restoration, along with local legend and reminiscences. When traffic lights were first installed, one city police captain was skeptical of their efficacy. He dutifully directed traffic for years with the light changing above him. “He was quite a character,” Grohe says. “We found many people to pose as their earlier relatives. A young Dwight Eisenhower passed through Bucyrus after his graduation from West Point, and I painted him trying to bum a dime for a phone call from a banker, a Mr. Blickey, who had been a banker in town for over 60 years. I portray the banker pulling out his pockets to show he has no change, Each of the approximately 80 people in the mural was a person with a story. As Grohe painted, passers-by would gaze at the emerging creation and remember—a father who had been a cook in the hotel, an uncle who had been a lawyer in a second floor office. Some of those recollections would become immortalized in art.

“People wanted those [old] buildings back, and they wanted the square the way it used it used to look at the turn of the last century. We put it back.”

It Starts with Stories

Eric and Kathy Grohe have enduring respect and affection for the people and places they have come to know. They want projects to capture local values, not just decorate a space. “Research is a great thrill. It’s a wonderful part of the process, and you can always find something” Grohe says of his local explorations. “I now know more about brewing beer than I ever thought I would. We had three clients that required that knowledge. We generally start by talking to the oldest person we can find who worked in the business.”

When researching a project for the American Hop Museum in Toppenish, Washington, he found people who had done the difficult work of harvesting the green cones from the vines before picking machines were used. “We found people who had gone out as a family unit and picked hops,” he says. “We listened to hours of stories. Sometimes just a little off hand comment would make a difference in a painting. We heard a story about a little competition between families, we learned the look guys had when they saw an overseer who wasn’t friendly to them, or how you could make the bag look fuller than it was when he was looking, and then go back and fill it later. You hear all the inside stuff, and something about it becomes a significant part of the image. You have to come upon the human touches, and make it connect with the viewer, emotionally, not just as an image of history. We want the work to have a real quality so you are influenced by it.”

Hops add aroma and bitterness to beer. The museum to honor the hop industry was in a rundown building built in 1917. Grohe’s artwork transformed the exterior with trompe l’oeil architectural details and murals commemorating the significance and dignity of the work.



When a rundown, 1917 building became the home of the American Hop Museum, little thought was given to its exterior.



Trompe l’oeil is a French term that literally means “trick of the eye.” It’s a style of painting that flourished in the Renaissance. Objects painted on flat surfaces look starkly three-dimensional. The depth in Grohe’s murals is



*18’ x 42’ (front); 18’ x 90’ (side); Acrylic and oils on prepared masonry
The addition of trompe l’oeil architecture, murals and text dignified the facade and provided a visual history of the local Hop industry.*

stunning. A viewer has an immediate sense of entering some scenes, and is convinced of structural solidity in columns and bridges in others. Grohe observes that all those techniques are explained in art textbooks, though he adds that he has done enough sculpture himself to appreciate sculptural achievements.

It's hard to imagine that *The Liberty Remembered* mural in Bucyrus, Ohio, is actually a flat wall. It shows Lady Liberty holding a dying soldier in her arms. The faces of 284 local veterans were painted to look as though they were carved in stone columns and on the wall behind the figure. The Grohes put an ad in the local paper seeking photographs of veterans from Crawford County, Ohio. "We also asked for pictures of people, living or dead, who have served in any of the services. There was a guy in town who had fought with George Washington," Grohe says, "and when he turned 103 someone took his picture. So he is there, and his relatives can recognize him, right next to a soldier from Desert Storm."



"Liberty Remembers"; 36' x 44' Keim Mineral Paint & Universal Render on concrete block. An old brick wall was reinforced with concrete block and transformed into a nationally recognized monument honoring veterans. In this mural, Lady Liberty cradles a dying soldier in her arms, surrounded by the portraits of 284 veterans from Crawford County, Ohio.

Halfway through the painting, a car pulled up and an elderly woman stepped out, recognized the face of her husband and burst into tears. The scene was repeated several times as passers-by recognized loved ones. “One day a father came whose son had just committed suicide because of the terrible problems he had with Gulf War Syndrome,” Grohe says. “I had just painted his face 10 days before.” The father stood before the mural, overwhelmed. Grohe recalls the encounter as emotional, and meaningful.

Another fulfilling project for the Grohes was creation of murals at the Washington State Correction Center for Women in Gig Harbor, Washington. Grohe met with administrators, guards and prisoners. One prisoner confided that the women who will be incarcerated forever need something comforting, and those who will be released need encouragement—a reminder that “there is a world out there.” The four murals in *Paths of Promise* are painted on panels and blend into the existing architecture of the prison courtyard, and are visible from the inmates’ daily route to and from the cafeteria. Grohe created beautiful images with no fences or barriers—a natural scene over a bridge, a cityscape with a waiting family, an archway that invites a gentle imaginary journey. After the work was fully installed, there was a presentation in the outdoor plaza, where a podium, loudspeakers and more than 100 seats were set up. Four inmates told how the “spirit-filled beauty” of the art inspired and heartened them. “There was not a dry eye in the audience,” Grohe says.



Details from one of the four murals in “*Paths of Promise*,” Washington State Corrections Center for Women • Four murals, 9’ x 15’ ea., acrylic on dibond®

A women’s prison is by nature confining and restrictive. The imagery in these four murals was created not only to provide a visual and mental escape, but to inspire as well. The murals were designed to fit within the existing architecture of the prison courtyard.

Steubenville, Ohio, was a steel town since its beginnings. Before painting his Tribute to the Steel Industry, Grohe took training in steel mills to get a sense of the daily routine. “If you stepped forward you’d get burned. If you stepped backwards you’d be electrocuted, if you stepped to the side you’d be crushed,” he says. “You have to communicate those conditions. We heard heartbreaking stories of families being destroyed by some aspect of it or another. We heard amazing stories of kids struggling with studies until 3 and 4 in the morning so they could try to get out. And sometimes they did, and they came back as owners, not laborers.”

Today people are more mobile, he observes. But back in the 20s and 30s, there was company housing, people lived in narrow little streets, and neither they nor their kids had much hope of leaving. “Years ago, you were a miner or a steel guy. That was it. It was a done deal.”

The Hard Work of Transformation

The murals are hard physical work. After the design is complete, Grohe says, it’s a race against the weather. He works seven days a week, from dawn to dark. Depending on the physical circumstances, it may be possible to protect a wall against direct rainfall, but the paint is sensitive to moisture content so the wall cannot be overly damp. While he has worked in blazing heat, Grohe says, “the surface, the air, the paint and myself have to be above 40 degrees” Fahrenheit. He employs skilled aides for some of the non-creative, but technically demanding work. While Grohe’s website www.ericgrohemurals.com reflects modern technological savvy, and a great opportunity to view his work, some of his materials were developed more than a century ago, and some of his techniques have been used by artists for thousands of years.

Grohe uses Keim mineral paint, which was developed 127 years ago. When Mad King Ludwig 11 of Austria was building his Neuschwanstein Castle in the late 1800s he was concerned about the quality of the paint on the turrets, which were hard for painters to climb. He contacted the scientist A.W. Keim, who combined a “liquid glass” with inorganic color pigments that permeate and chemically react with the surfaces to which they are applied. “All the pigments we use come from the ground. Iron oxide, for instance, has gone through chemical processes for millions of years. So these paints produce beautiful, vibrant colors that stay that way,” Grohe explains. “The other pigments you get off the shelf commercially are all synthetic, with molecules built last week. They are subject to change. In the presence of oxygen and ultraviolet light they break down, and sometimes shift from one color to another, and sometimes they just fade.”

“Halfway through the painting, a car pulled up and an elderly woman stepped out, recognized the face of her husband in the mural and burst into tears.”

How do you transfer an image from a conceptual drawing to the scale needed for a 50 foot high wall? The same way Michelangelo did on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. You put the large image on paper, use a ponce wheel, similar to one used in sewing, to make holes in the paper, then hit the paper with a sock full of powdered chalk. The chalk goes through the holes and leaves a tracing of the image on the wall. He uses a snap line, or a chalk coated cord on a wheel with a side crank to produce a horizontal line. A few hundred years ago mural painters used a string wound around a twig, Grohe comments, and there is still no better way.

On big mural projects, says Grohe, the artwork is the “tip of the proverbial iceberg”. The drama is in the planning, the committee meetings, the political arguing and the replay of local antipathies that have intensified for decades that have little or nothing to do with art. “Sometimes we are like bartenders at large,” Grohe remarks. Sometimes they mediate, sometimes avoid the fray.

“We live in the communities where we work,” Grohe adds. “We invest a year of our lives. It’s all very personal to us. You always connect with people on these projects. I don’t think there is a single project we’ve done where there weren’t stories connected to the research or the imagery. These are truly stories of life, death, and heroic circumstances.”

Painting in public, at ground level or on a lift, for six months at a stretch invites people to talk. “We hear every story,” Grohe says. “Sometimes people tell you things they wouldn’t tell their psychiatrists.”

But the Grohes take personal foibles in stride, keep confidences, and retain fond memories. Grohe says he’s always asked his favorite mural, and his answer is always “the next one”. Any work in progress, he says, ought to tap past experience to be the best, most emotional, most challenging or most transforming. Working on projects that mean something to a community has huge rewards, Grohe says, and when they are finished, it’s always a long goodbye.

The Grohes are now off to the Cempacka International School in Malaysia where Grohe has been invited to teach students from several countries the aesthetics and mechanics of painting murals. ■

By: Prucia Buscell, Plexus Institute

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