

Murals and Public Art Will Become a 'Defining Feature' of University Identity

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The University of Arizona campus is getting some color.

Local artist Danny Martin recently splashed his paint on the southeast corner of Arizona Stadium. The mural, "The Cactus Comet Rides Again," depicts legendary UA football player Art Luppino, known as "The Cactus Comet," decked out as a Día de los Muertos calavera, or sugar skull. Luppino races through a hot pink desert, and a Día de los Muertos Wildcat scurries up a saguaro, as red and blue rays stream from a sun setting behind "A" Mountain.

Under the University's strategic plan, art will become a defining feature of the campus and will be ever-present in the student, faculty, staff and community experience, said School of Art Director **Colin Blakely** ^[1]. Public art will play a key role in realizing this vision.

"We wanted to have a local artist paint an original mural with local influence that connected Tucson with the University," said **James Francis** ^[2], senior associate athletics director for external operations. "We contacted Mr. Luppino and he was happy with the mural. He even shared that the action photo (taken at a 1954 game) is his all-time favorite, and that the original photo hangs on the wall in his den."

Athletics commissioned the mural to celebrate the cultural heritage of the Southwest and the history of Arizona football on campus, according to the mural's plaque.

Martin chose Luppino as his subject because Martin believes Luppino brought positive national attention to the UA, he said.

"To me, he's a symbol of 1950s Tucson," Martin said. Luppino was the first player to win consecutive NCAA rushing titles and is a charter member of the [University of Arizona Sports Hall of Fame](#) ^[3]. His No. 22 is the first of nine retired Arizona football jerseys.

Martin, who has lived in Arizona for 15 years, earned his Master of Fine Arts degree from the UA in 2008.

The Arizona Stadium mural is one of his latest. All in all, he has painted about 100 murals, most of them in Tucson.

"This was a terrific opportunity for a collaborative project with campus, and to highlight the College of Fine Arts and work done by a graduate of the program," Francis said.

"It was a humbling experience to be invited back by my alma mater to do something on that scale," Martin said. "Not only because it's on the stadium, but it's also part of the public face of the stadium. You can see it just driving or walking by."

And that's the point.

Within the campus arts district, the University plans to draw in and honor the community in a similar way.

"If we think about the space along Olive Road between Speedway and Second as the center of the district, then the underpass is the gateway or portal," Blakely said. "We've secured funding to commission a national or international artist to transform the Olive Road underpass using light, sound and video to create an experience that beckons visitors as they approach the tunnel. When they emerge from this experience, they're at the front door of the arts district."

The School of Art has also commissioned a mural – which will wrap around the Art Building Addition – from Karlito Miller Espinosa, an MFA alumnus and world-renowned muralist who goes by Mata Ruda.

"One part of the mural will face Olive Road and another will face Speedway," Blakely said. "We felt that was a great way to connect the public- and inward-facing sides of campus and create a really good metaphor for what we're trying to do in the broader sense."

The mural's themes will explore the opportunities presented by the school's location just 50 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border on land that includes Hispanic and Native American communities.

The mural is scheduled to be completed by the end of the academic year.

Want to know more about the public art on campus? View images of public art around campus [here](#) ^[4] and get more information [here](#) ^[5]. You can sign up for public art tours [here](#) ^[6].

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Links

[1] <https://art.arizona.edu/people/directory/cblakely/> [2] <https://arizonawildcats.com/staff.aspx?staff=8> [3] <https://arizonawildcats.com/sports/2015/9/5/209273862.aspx> [4] https://artmuseum.arizona.edu/public_art [5] <https://artmuseum.arizona.edu/collections/public-art> [6] <https://visitorcenter.arizona.edu/events/public-art-tour>