

# Mural Comments About Water, and a City Doesn't Like It

By [RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD](#), *New York Times*, November 3, 2005

BISHOP, Calif., Oct. 27 - A new mural here depicts an idyllic Owens Valley, with a lush meadow, a surging river and snow-capped mountains.

And then there is the matter of one jarring detail - a big rusty drainpipe etched with the letters LADWP, for Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, sucking the color and, metaphorically, the water out of the vista.



*John Pugh [is shown above] with his mural "Drain" in Bishop, Calif. He said he meant no ill will toward Los Angeles.*

The mural, called "Drain," seeks to portray, in a trompe l'oeil way, the fact that Los Angeles virtually bought the river here a century ago and diverted much of its water more than 200 miles south to develop the parched, dusty town that has become the nation's second-largest city. That deft move was depicted, with some Hollywood distortion, in the 1974 movie "Chinatown."

What has happened since the mural went up on the side of a commercial building early in October suggests that although the water wars that defined the settling of the West have quieted, the hard feelings remain very much alive.

Many in town, long regarding their relationship with Los Angeles as somewhat like colony to court, nod approvingly at the work. But the Los Angeles water agency, one of the biggest property owners around here, is not happy and has retaliated with fury.

It canceled a \$500 donation to the Bishop Mural Society, which approved the work, and promised in a letter from its regional manager, Gene L. Coufal, to "more closely scrutinize all requests for assistance throughout the Owens Valley," something many in town take as a threat.

"It's unfortunate that at a time like this with so much terrorism, violence, hatred and war in the world, such a false and negative depiction of Los Angeles's Owens Valley water-gathering activities would be produced," Mr. Coufal wrote.

Another official, Brian Tillemans, the watershed resource manager, said the mural failed to take into account the agency's good stewardship of land it owned.

"Los Angeles has kept the watershed undeveloped and in good condition to protect the water supply of Los Angeles from urbanization, pollution and other threats," Mr. Tillemans wrote in a letter to *The Inyo Register*, noting, among other points, the benefits to recreation and wildlife in the valley.

Lynette McIntosh, who owns Window Fair, the store where the mural is painted, said Mr. Coufal's wife had warned her that employees of the utility would not shop there, though later she apologized "for the way she acted."

The town is astir with rumors that utility employees have threatened to boycott other businesses with connections to the mural society. The president of the society, Barbel Ackermann-Williams, declined to comment on such talk, but defended the mural as "both beautiful and historically correct."

"Public art has caused controversy throughout the ages, though it was unintentional in this case," Ms. Ackermann-Williams said.

Earlier, Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa of Los Angeles promised to improve relations with the valley, which has for decades tangled in court with the city over water diversions. Joe Ramallo, a spokesman for the mayor, said that Mr. Coufal's "letter should not have been sent" and that Mr. Villaraigosa "welcomes projects like this."

Deputy Mayor Nancy Sutley said the mayor had expressed his dismay to managers at the water department. A spokeswoman for the agency would not comment on the mural.

John Pugh, the San Francisco Bay Area artist who painted the work as part of a series of historical murals going up all over this small town, said he meant no ill will toward Los Angeles.

Although Mr. Coufal wrote in his letter that "it's obvious the scenes depicted in the mural are not realistic portrayals" of the valley then or now, Mr. Pugh said they were based on scores of photographs and paintings. The scene depicted is a composite image inspired by sites around the valley, he said.

"It was meant to be edgy," Mr. Pugh said, "but it was a historical concept mural that has been transformed into a historical, political issue."

Although there may not actually be a rusty drainpipe like the one in the picture - Mr. Pugh said the drainpipe idea came to him one day while taking a shower - he said people would understand the metaphor.

"I am not unhappy it has become controversial," he said of his work, if only because people are talking about their feelings. "By keeping it quiet, it is like a dysfunctional family."

Jerry Core, the owner of a title company and the building with the mural, covered most of Mr. Pugh's \$30,000 fee. Mr. Core also reimbursed the mural society for the \$500 that the water department declined to provide.

"A picture says a thousand words I guess," Mr. Core said, "and this one I guess hits very close to home."

John Walton, a professor at the University of California, Davis, who has written on the water wars, said the mural was a fair representation of Los Angeles's taking water from the valley. But Professor Walton said the mural fed into the legend that the valley would have been an agricultural wonderland if Los Angeles had not intruded.

"Two things are true," he said. "L.A. forcibly acquired the water, and the agricultural economy of the valley was always precarious. The first fact has led many to romanticize the second."

Barbara Ferrey-Laughon, the president of the Chamber of Commerce and the former editor of The Inyo Register, said the subject was so sensitive that it would have been nearly impossible to create a painting about it without upsetting somebody.

"I think a lot of the wounds that occurred in the water wars haven't healed," Ms. Ferrey-Laughon said. "They are covered over for a little bit, and then something like this picks at it."

Christopher Stube, a landscape artist who recently dropped by to inspect the mural, said he had mixed feelings. But like many others, Mr. Stube said the Los Angeles water officials had overreacted and "would have done themselves a favor if they just ignored the mural."