

Identity in Works by Yoshida Lawrence and Aranda

Posted on January 10, 2020

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Introduction

Identity in visual art is produced through more than recognizable ethnic symbols. It emerges through bodies, clothing, gesture, language, color, material, architecture, public memory, and the relationship between an artwork and the community that encounters it. Chester Yoshida's *Oshogatsu JAM* poster, Jacob Lawrence's 1951 painting *Vaudeville*, and Guillermo "Yermo" Aranda's 1970 mural *La Dualidad* offer three distinct ways of making cultural identity visible. A poster for a Japanese New Year event organizes participation in a living community tradition; Lawrence's painting examines Black performance through the emotional tension between entertainment and interior dignity; Aranda's mural places Chicano experience within Indigenous cosmology, historical conflict, and monumental public space. These works should not be treated as interchangeable examples of "culture" because their media and purposes differ. Their common significance lies in the way each asks viewers to recognize identity as something enacted, represented, and negotiated rather than inherited as a fixed label. Meaning develops through the encounter among artistic form, historical context, audience knowledge, and the institutions in which the work circulates.

Oshogatsu JAM: Identity Through Gathering

Yoshida's *Oshogatsu JAM* poster connects graphic design with the Japanese New Year, a major annual celebration shaped by family gatherings, food, visits, ritual, performance, and community events. The poster's practical function is important because it does more than represent Japanese or Japanese American identity from a distance: it invites people to participate in a scheduled social event where cultural memory becomes action. The word "JAM" gives the event an informal, contemporary energy and suggests that tradition is being adapted rather than reproduced as a museum artifact. In diaspora communities, a church, cultural center, or neighborhood venue may function as more than a religious or administrative site; it can become a place where generations exchange language, foodways, music, stories, and social networks. The poster therefore helps create the community it depicts. Its audience is not passive, because viewers can recognize symbols differently, choose whether to attend, and reshape the event through participation. Japanese American identity appears here as a living practice formed through gathering, translation, and adaptation to a local setting.

Jacob Lawrence's Vaudeville and the Public Mask

Jacob Lawrence's *Vaudeville* depicts two Black entertainers whose clown-like costumes contrast with serious, inward expressions, creating tension between the public demand for amusement and the private humanity of the performers. Lawrence, a major African American modernist, frequently used flattened space, angular forms, strong color, and rhythmic composition to portray Black history, labor, migration, family, and urban life. Vaudeville offered Black performers visibility and professional opportunity, but it developed within an entertainment industry shaped by segregation, racist caricature, and the legacy of minstrelsy. Lawrence's figures reportedly draw on performers Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham and Tim Moore, whose professional skill existed within those contradictory structures (Wheat, 1986). The painting's emotional force comes from refusing to make the performers identical with their roles. Their costumes announce comedy, yet their faces resist the expectation that entertainers must appear permanently cheerful for an audience. Performance becomes a kind of mask even without a literal covering. Lawrence humanizes people who might otherwise be reduced to racial type, comic function, or stereotype (Lawrence, 1951).

La Dualidad and Chicano Historical Memory

Guillermo "Yermo" Aranda's *La Dualidad*, created in 1970 for the Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego, uses monumental scale and Indigenous, Chicano, cosmic, animal, and historical imagery to place community identity within a much longer narrative. Its location is central to its meaning because the mural belongs to a cultural institution shaped by Chicano and Indigenous artistic activism rather than to a neutral gallery. The title directs attention toward opposing and complementary forces: life and death, earth and sky, Indigenous and European histories, destruction and creation, oppression and resistance. A feathered serpent evokes Mesoamerican traditions associated with Quetzalcoatl and visually joins sky and earth through a hybrid form, while pyramidal and cosmic imagery connect contemporary Chicano identity with precolonial civilizations. The crucified or bound Chicano figure introduces suffering, conquest, sacrifice, and political oppression, but the surrounding symbols prevent suffering from becoming the community's only identity. The mural instead frames conflict within continuity, memory, and transformation, giving Chicano experience a monumental public scale (Centro Cultural de la Raza, 2025; Google Arts & Culture, 2026).

Medium, Audience, and the Politics of Representation

The three works differ not only in subject but in how their media organize the relationship with viewers. A poster is temporary, portable, and informational; it must communicate quickly and encourage attendance. A painting can circulate through collections and museums, allowing concentrated viewing of individual figures and formal composition. A mural is architectural and place-

bound, turning a wall into a shared field of public memory. These differences shape identity. Yoshida's poster helps sustain culture by mobilizing a community event, Lawrence's painting asks an audience to look past a performed role into emotional complexity, and Aranda's mural makes marginalized history physically difficult to ignore. Self-representation is politically significant because Japanese American, Black, Chicano, and Indigenous communities have often been represented by outsiders through simplified types. Yet no artist can speak for an entire group. Each work offers one constructed perspective shaped by its time, maker, institution, and intended audience. Cultural identity becomes visible through representation without becoming reducible to one image or one set of symbols.

Interpreting Identity Without Stereotyping

Identity analysis becomes weak when every artistic decision is explained only through ethnicity. Lawrence is a Black artist, but *Vaudeville* also concerns modernist form, labor, psychological interiority, performance, and the relationship between spectators and entertainers. Aranda's mural is a Chicano work, yet it also explores cosmology, duality, sacrifice, and the transformation of historical memory. Yoshida's poster participates in Japanese New Year culture while functioning simultaneously as graphic design, event communication, and diaspora community building. Viewers therefore need both close looking and contextual research. A serpent may appear threatening to an audience unfamiliar with Mesoamerican symbolism, while another viewer recognizes sacred or cosmological associations. A clown costume may appear simply comic until the racial history of vaudeville changes its meaning. A festive poster may seem decorative until a diaspora viewer connects it with family practice and communal continuity. Responsible interpretation remains open to correction and distinguishes evidence in the artwork from assumptions imported by the viewer.

Conclusion

Oshogatsu JAM, *Vaudeville*, and *La Dualidad* demonstrate three distinct ways that art makes cultural identity public. Yoshida's poster turns Japanese and Japanese American tradition into collective participation by inviting a community to gather and renew a New Year practice. Lawrence's painting exposes the tension between Black performers' public comic roles and the private dignity visible in their serious expressions, challenging an audience to see people beyond entertainment stereotypes. Aranda's mural connects Chicano identity with Indigenous cosmology, historical suffering, resistance, and the creative tension implied by duality. The comparison shows that identity is not communicated only through subject matter; medium, scale, location, audience, and historical power all influence meaning. These works also resist the idea that authenticity requires unchanged tradition. Each transforms inherited material through a modern visual form. Their strongest shared lesson is therefore not that art defines Japanese, Black, or Chicano identity, but that visual culture provides a space where communities can preserve memory, challenge reductive representation, and negotiate how they are seen by themselves and by others.

References

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