

EIC Mural Statement 2026
Jamie John

From Acorn to Oak

Mighty oaks from little acorns grow.
-Troilus and Criseyde (1374) by Geoffrey Chaucer

The strong oak stands central, its root permeating beyond the ground and connecting to the mycelium of the mushrooms. These connecting lines or “spirit lines” are well known characteristics of the Anishinaabe Woodland art style originating from the birch bark writings of Three Fires people. These lines connect the animals of the land, sky, and water with the forested area that surrounds them.

On either side, framing the mural are two cedar trees, one of the four most revered medicines of the Anishinaabe, the others being sage, sweetgrass, and tobacco. Cedar holds many teachings about the importance of water, the way home, and collective care. Above the oak tree is the head and shoulders of a human figure with a river lotus in her chest where her heart lives. She is surrounded by a Haudenosaunee and Mi'kmaq inspired basketry pattern to reference the sharing of territories between Eastern Woodland and Great Lakes nations. This connects Indigenous nations and Native peoples of past, present, and future to the land that campus occupies long before the estate became associated with Henry Ford.

From inside the central oak tree there looks the face of an eastern screech owl from a cavern alongside a woodpecker with shelf mushrooms below them. On one side of the oak tree is a blue heron, wild rice, cattails, a brown bat, a coyote, a scarlet tanager, and a squirrel. The other side shows a wolverine, a fox, a Baltimore oriole, and a Sandhill crane. Below the ground mushrooms is a swimming beaver, tadpole madtoms, frogs, dragonflies, painted turtles, a marbled salamander, and a garter snake along with river lotuses, arrowhead leaves, bladderwort, and cardinal flowers. All of these plant and animal species can be found and observed in and around southeast Michigan with many of these species having longstanding relationships with the Anishinaabe people.

Every living being in this mural depends upon the health of the Rouge River and the surrounding wetlands. When “water is life” is not hyperbole or metaphorical—it is literal. It is a rallying cry. It is a call to action. It is a call to defend Indigenous sovereignty against the forces who want Native peoples erased and disappeared. Without the water this is no life. More than an image of flora and fauna—this is an image asserting the existence and importance of the biodiversity that Indigenous peoples defend and stands

a testament to what we stand to lose if the land, water, and sky stand alone without protection from the people who care and depend upon their health and safety.