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**Mexican Muralism**

(ca. 1920-1940)

The Mexican Muralist movement was a nationalistic movement that aimed at producing an official modern art form distinct from the European tradition, embracing and clearly expressing a unique Mexican cultural and social identity. Shortly after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), expatriate Mexican artists were summoned to return to the country. They were charged with creating public murals on government buildings, which would visually communicate unifying ideals to a largely illiterate population. **Diego Rivera**, **José Clemente Orozco**, and **David Alfaro Siqueiros**, known collectively as “***Los Tres Grandes***” or The Great Three, were key figures in the movement. The architectural aspect of the large murals created during this period underscores the government’s and artists’ belief in art as a social and ideological tool, and reflects a desire to establish permanent expressions of a national identity. The works embraced and elevated mural painting in Mexico from a popular form to a form of high art. Further, the movement embodied social ideals manifested in the muralists work alongside carpenters, plasterers, and other laborers. The 1930s saw the solidification of a leftist national discourse, but by the 1940s, the major political developments in Mexico and Europe resulted in significant redefinition of this ideology, and Mexican Muralism became outdated.

**The History of Mexican Muralism**

In 1921 President Álvaro Obregón’s (1920-1924) Minister of Education José Vasconcelos commissioned several artists to paint murals at the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria*. Between 1922-1924 ***Los Tres Grandes***, among others, painted a number of murals at the elite secondary school, intended to instruct and inspire the nation’s next generation of leaders. These works were local and experimental, yet influenced by European traditions in several ways: they focused on current events and politics, which were presented through allegory as in academic European paintings; the styles were influenced by pre-Columbian and Mexican folk art, as well as Cubism; and artists experimented with their own techniques for mural painting, while also investigating *buon fresco* (“true” fresco: pigments mixed in water, applied to wet plaster) and other techniques, which had long histories in Europe.

Under President Plutarco Calles (1924-28) official murals still sought to reinforce national ideals, but also attempted to shift the public’s view away from government corruption. Artists softened the image of the Revolution to appeal to a popular nostalgic sentiment. From the late 1920s through the 1930s, subject matter shifted from immediate political concerns to a questioning of the past and a new understanding of the national cultural and social identity, which was focused on an industrialized future. Major mural cycles from 1929-1935 represent the institutionalization of Mexican Muralism.

The administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) brought a reversal of sorts to Mexican politics: following the deportation of Calles and his affiliates, official ideology returned to the forms of the 1920s based social reform and egalitarian principles. Industry was nationalized. This period saw Mexico’s international coming of age and the blossoming of the mural movement. Rivera’s murals from this period were officially sanctioned and also broadly appealing, presenting a mythologized Revolution viewed through popular cultural imagery and the artist’s utopian social perspective.

An often-violent shift toward conservatism at the end of the 1930s brought a significant change in Mexican politics, which after 1940 resulted in a tense relationship between the government and Mexican Muralism. Moderate conservative President Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946) maintained the existing structure of the state, but repurposed muralism to promote very different ideals. Camacho’s administration focused on rapid industrialization and urban consumerism, and was more interested in exploiting the reputation of muralism than its content. *Los Tres Grandes* were given national honors, appointments, and commissions in the interest of promoting Mexico internationally, especially to the U.S. However, by the mid-1940s, the long-standing relationship between the state and the muralists broke down, and the ideals and messages of the 1920s and ‘30s were left behind.

**Mexican Muralists of Note**

The unique personalities, backgrounds, attitudes, and styles of *Los Tres Grandes*, the three best-known and most active Mexican muralists, are evident in their work from the 1930s onward. As their styles matured, they began to clearly communicate their personal philosophies on Mexicanness within the broader context of the modern industrialized world. **Diego Rivera** has consistently been the most famous of this group. His works are visually the most accessible, and the most thematically neutral. His utopian view of Mexican history was directly supported by post-Revolutionary ideology of the 1920s, and later by Communism. **José Clemente Orozco** was disappointed by the Revolution, and this showed in his harsher, geometric style and somber palette. His murals of the 1920s and ‘30s often stressed his pessimism regarding the post-Revolutionary government and its social ideals. **David Alfaro Siqueiros**, however, expressed his radical progressive political ideals the most passionately of the three. He made a clear break with officially sanctioned Mexican Muralism, incorporating photographic elements and using innovative materials and methods such as pyroxaline (industrial pigments mixed with cement) applied by spray gun.

Other notable muralists include **Dr. Atl**, **Jean Charlot**, and **Rufino Tamayo**.

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**List of Works (selected):**

1. Charlot: *The Massacre at the Templo Mayor*, 1923

2. Siqueiros: *Los Elementos*, 1923

3. Rivera: *La Creación*, 1922-23

4. Orozco *Maternidad*, 1923-24

5. Rivera: *Distribution of the Land*, 1923-24

6. Siqueiros: *Burial of a Worker,* 1923-24

7. Rivera: *Liberated Earth with the Natural Forces Controlled by Man*, 1926

8. Rivera: *The Distribution of Arms* and *Our Daily Bread*, 1928

9. Rivera: *History of Cuernavaca and Morelos*, 1929-30

10. Tamayo: *Song and Music*, 1933

11. Rivera: *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*, 1935

12. Orozco: *The Carnival of Ideologies*, 1937-39

13. Orozco *The Spanish Conquest of Mexico* and *Man of Fire*, 1938-39

14. Siqueiros: *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, 1939-40