Contributor: Deborah Caplow

**Orozco, José Clemente**

Born: 1883— Zapotlán el Grande, Jalisco; Died 1949—Mexico City

JoséClemente Orozco was one of a trio of painters of the **Mexican Mural Movement**, called Los Tres Grandes (The Three Great Ones), the others being **Diego Rivera** and **David Alfaro Siqueiros**. Known for his bleak view of history, his murals are often bitter condemnations of human barbarity. He studied painting at the Academy of San Carlos, and in 1923 Minister of Education Jose Vasconcelos commissioned him to paint murals at the Escuela Preparatoria Nacional (National Preparatory School); these focused on Mexican history, including the Conquest of Mexico and the Mexican Revolution. Orozco lived in the United States from 1927 to 1934, and painted murals at Pomona College (1930), The New School for Social Research (1930-31), and Dartmouth College (1933-34). When Orozco returned to Mexico, he painted his mural *Catharsis* at the Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts) in Mexico City, and in the later 1930s he created murals in Guadalajara, the University of Guadalajara, the Palacio de Gobierno (Governor’s Palace) and the chapel of the Hospicio Cabañas. These are considered to be some of his most important works. Near the end of his life he began to make easel paintings in a simplified style reflective of **Abstract Expressionism.**

Orozco had a career as an agronomist and architectural draftsman before entering the Academy of San Carlos in 1906. During the Revolution, Orozco drew cartoons for the newspaper *La vanguardia* (“The Vanguard”), and witnessed the violence of the Revolution in the city of Orizaba. From 1917 to 1919 Orozco worked in the United States; upon his return to Mexico, he painted frescos at the National Preparatory School (now the Museo de San Ildefonso) commissioned by José Vasconcelos, Minister of Education. Painted between 1923 to 1926, Orozco’s portrayal of events from the Conquest to the Mexican Revolution is gloomy and pessimistic. He depicted Hernán Cortés and his indigenous consort, La Malinche, as the progenitors of the Mexican people, yet their relationship is oppressive. Her brown skin and half-closed eyes contrast with his chalky complexion and arrogant stare, and his arm holds her back in a gesture that could be protective or oppressive.



Orozco, José Clemente, Cortes and Malinche, Colegio de San Ildefonso, Mexico City, Mexico, 1926

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CortesMalincheOrozcoSICDF.JPG>

*The Franciscan and the Indian* is also ambiguous, as a friar bends over a naked Indian, kissing him or sucking life from him. In *The Trench*, the Revolution is presented as a pointless sacrifice, the bodies of the soldiers making the shape of a cross. Other images of Mexican society and the Catholic Church were scathingly satirical, and conservative students attacked the murals; the damage can still be seen.

In 1923, along with Rivera, Siqueiros and others, he organized the Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Artistas (Union of Technical Workers, Painters and Artists, SOTPE); they proclaimed solidarity with other unions, and wanted artists to be considered workers and paid by the hour. Orozco later claimed that he opposed all dogma, and he was scornful of Rivera’s *indigenismo* (admiration for the indigenous cultures of Mexico). However, he was also a member of the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionaria (League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists, LEAR) from 1934 to 1937.

One of Orozco’s influences was printmaker **José Guadalupe Posada**, who popularized skeleton images called *calaveras*.

Orozco lived in the United States from 1927 to 1934. He painted a giant figure of Prometheus at Pomona College in 1930, and a mural at the New School for Research in New York that included figures such as Gandhi, Lenin and Stalin. In his *Epic of American Civilization* at Dartmouth College he focused on the histories of the United States and Mexico, using brighter colors than usual. In his audacious panel *Gods of the Modern World*,also called *Alma Mater*, Orozco personified the college as a skeleton giving birth, assisted by the president of the College, also a skeleton, with robed skeleton professors in the background.



Orozco, José Clemente, Gods of the Modern World, The Epic of American Civilization, 1934, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire

Link <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/jose-clemente-orozco/gods-of-the-modern-world-the-epic-of-american-civilization-1934>

He painted Emiliano Zapata, hero of the Revolution, flanked by capitalists and military officers, as an American general stabs him in the back. Other panels display Aztec myths and Christian imagery. The President of Dartmouth, Ernest Hopkins, defended these murals successfully against their detractors, while Rivera’s controversial mural in Rockefeller Center was destroyed in 1934.

From 1934 to 1940, Orozco worked in Guadalajara, again focusing on Mexican history. In the Governor’s Palace he painted a gigantic figure of Father Miguel Hidalgo brandishing a fiery torch, and in the Hospicio Cabañas he painted Mexican history from the Conquest to the present. Here Cortes is half man, half machine, and a stern Franciscan friar holds the alphabet, bringing education to Mexico. In the dome the transcendent *Hombre de fuego* (Man of Fire) is a foreshortened figure surrounded in flames, carried up into the heavens or descending into Hell.



Orozco, José Clemente, *Hombre de fuego* (Man of Fire), Hospicio Cabañas, Guadalajara, Mexico, 1939. http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/04/Orozco\_hombre\_de\_fuego\_GDL.JPG

Orozco also created a significant body of prints and paintings, including several harsh, uncompromising self-portraits. His later works are remarkably abstract, as in his *Paisaje metafísica* (Metaphysical Landscape) of 1948, a simple black rectangle against a pale background. Painted the year before Orozco’s death, it is a powerful meditation on mortality.

**Further Reading:**

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Folgarait, L. (1998) *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940*. Cambridge: University Press. New York.

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**Works By**

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List of Artworks:

Murals in the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, Mexico City, 1923-1926.

*Prometheus*, Mural at Pomona College, Pomona California, 1930.

*The Epic of American Civilization*, murals at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, 1932-1934.

Hospicio Cabañas Murals, Guadalajara, Mexico, 1936-1939.

*The People and Its Leaders*, Murals in the Palacio de Gobierno, Guadalajara, Mexico, 1937-1939.

*Dive Bomber and Tank*, Portable Mural, Museum of Modern Art, 1940.

*Metaphysical Painting*, oil on canvas, 1948.