

# **Mexican Muralism: Its Social-Educative Roles in Latin America and the United States**

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Mexican muralism was originally created to play a social role in the post-revolutionary period of modern Mexico. It was clearly an art of *advocacy*, and in many cases it was intended to change consciousness and promote political action. (Whether or not it succeeded is a matter for sociological investigation.) Its other role was educative: to convey information about the pre-Columbian heritage (in the 1920s, a new and revolutionary concept); to teach the history of Mexico from the Conquest to Independence; and to deal with national and international problems from the Reform to the contemporary period.

Since the muralists undertook to address a mass, largely illiterate audience in the 1920s, they chose a realistic style (often narrative) that would serve, as in the Renaissance, like a "painted book," and they contracted to paint their murals in accessible public buildings—government buildings, markets, schools, etc.

The argument for teachers today is that Mexican murals can still be used in an educative manner in schools. The same

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is true for the murals of other Latin American artists and for the Chicano murals of the seventies, which were influenced by the Mexicans. However, some words of caution are necessary concerning the *method* of using art to teach other subjects in another time and another cultural framework.

First, artists are *not* historians. Some, like Diego Rivera, were encyclopedic in their research for the painted images they produced. Nevertheless, two points must be kept in mind: (a) the advocacy position already mentioned—meaning the interpretative function of the artist with his material according to his personal politics and ideology; and (b) the poetic license that accompanies even the most “objective” presentation of the facts.

Second, a historical perspective is necessary. *When* a particular mural was painted is important since the issues and attitudes toward them have certainly changed with time. It is also important to consider *where* and *for whom* a mural was painted, especially when different national, regional, and local issues and attitudes are addressed. I would argue that *all* art viewing is more meaningful and emotionally stimulating when considered within its historical and cultural context. I hold the still unpopular view that understanding and enjoyment of art is time-and-culture bound. The enduring works are those reinterpreted for each society's needs; the original context is invariably lost in a short time or across any distance. Art—except on a formal, decorative level perhaps—is neither eternal nor universal; it functions in a time-space continuum and is assigned a new meaning in a new framework.

These cautionary suggestions can work advantageously in an educational situation. Art—particularly that being considered here, which is especially accessible because of its original purpose—can be used, as novels and films are, in history, sociology, or political science classes. Art becomes accessory to the facts and theories; it gives a human dimension and a personal point of view. Most important, art provides insight into the complexities of the time as interpreted by an individual artist or an artistic group.

An idea can appear in one time framework serving a given historical function, then reappear later transformed and charged with new meanings and implications. For example, the image of the Mexican revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata had one meaning for José Guadalupe Posada, a Mexican engraver during the early revolutionary period; he was sympathetic, but at times satirical of a contemporary. For Diego Rivera, at a later date, Zapata represented the promises of the Mexican Revolution for agrarian reform and land distribution. Rivera treated Zapata as a historical heroic figure (he was assassinated in 1919 before Rivera returned from his European studies). For contemporary Mexicans in the U.S., Zapata has become deified and sacrosanct. He has left history and become an abstract symbol. The fact that city-born youths from large urban ghettos in the United States transform a Mexican peasant leader into a hero image for their aspirations gives insight into the contemporary Chicano dynamic. Zapata has since been supplemented by more contemporary and relevant hero models: César Chávez, Che Guevara, and Rubén Salazar.

### **Indigenism**

Diego Rivera in 1921 painted the first mural of what has become known as the Mexican Mural Renaissance. Many of his murals precisely depict the great Indian civilizations that existed before the Spanish conquest. Rivera, one of the earliest Mexicans to appreciate and collect pre-Columbian artifacts, carefully researched the history, culture, and art forms and represented them with great accuracy and detail. Poetic license and substitutions of motifs and images can, however, be found in his paintings. After the Mexican Revolution Rivera was concerned with two issues, and these determined his artistic themes: the need to offset the contempt with which the conquistadores had viewed the ancient Indian civilizations; and the need to offset the anti-mestizo and anti-Indian attitudes of the European-oriented ruling classes during the Porfiriato (the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz). Mestizo and Indian peasants formed the basic

fighting forces of the Revolution, and their economic needs were to be addressed on the political plane. The role of the arts was to restore understanding of and pride in the heritage and cultures that the concept of Spanish superiority had subverted. Post-revolutionary *indigenista* philosophy appeared in the work of writers, musicians, filmmakers, sculptors, and painters as a facet of Mexican nationalism. In an advocacy position, the early indigenistas tended to glorify the Indian heritage and vilify that of the Spaniards as a means of rectifying a historical imbalance and advancing certain political ideas.

The *tres grandes* (Big Three) of the Mexican mural movement did not all agree in their interpretations of the indigenous heritage. Rivera idealized the Indian past as seen in his depiction of the Toltec god Quetzalcoatl in the National Palace mural. Except for the small Indian group engaged in warfare at the lower left of the painting, all is peace and harmony. This contrasts with the realities of the ancient past; especially the conflicts of empire-building cultures like the Olmec, Teotihuacano, Toltec, Maya, and Aztec whose war-riving activities are reflected in their arts. Rivera shows ancient civilization almost without conflict; ideal and utopian like a lost Golden Age.

José Clemente Orozco had a very different view of history. He was a *hispanista*. As his paintings and writings make evident, he opposed Indian glorification, ancient or modern. However, he did add one ancient Indian to his pantheon of heroes: Quetzalcoatl. Orozco depicted him as a statesman, educator, promoter of the arts and civilization who, according to legend, was eventually exiled by the restored clergy of older gods he had replaced, and sailed away on a raft of serpents. It is curious that Orozco chose a mythological figure whom legend described as having been white-skinned, bearded, and blue-eyed—the very antithesis of the dark-skinned, dark-haired Indians. Orozco's heroes were often of Greek origin (Prometheus, the Man of Fire) or Spanish (Cortés, Franciscan monks, or the criollo Father Hidalgo), or

were allegories of spirituality, education, human rationality, or rebellion. He did heroize modern Indian/mestizo leaders like Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Benito Juárez, and Zapata. For him, these—like Quetzalcoatl—were the exceptional men who stood above the crowd.

The notion of a white hero/god as saviour and civilizer of dark-skinned peoples is not unique to Orozco; more recently the idea has been promulgated by diffusionist anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl in books on the Ra reed vessels he sailed from Africa to the New World in an attempt to prove that the ancient Egyptians brought pyramids and mathematics to the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Ironically, the Egyptian civilization evolved in an African context, and the Egyptians themselves can certainly not be classified as “white,” although the hierarchy of Western civilization which rests on the Egyptian-Greek-Roman foundation has “sanitized” Egypt by conceptually separating it and its history from that of black Africa. Thus Orozco’s Quetzalcoatl and Heyerdahl’s Egyptians both underline a European ethnocentricity.

Rivera and Orozco again illustrate their dichotomy in differing treatments of the ancient Aztecs. Rivera’s mural of the marketplace Tlatelolco is an encyclopedic presentation of the multiple products, services, activities, and personages to be seen at the great Aztec marketplace. Presided over by an enthroned official, all is calm and orderly in the market. In the background is a topographical view of the Aztec capital city Tenochtitlan, with its pyramids, plazas, palaces, and canals. The painting gives no hint of Aztec imperialism, which the market symbolizes. Tribute and sacrifice victims were brought to Tenochtitlan from the subject peoples.

Orozco, on the other hand, took a critical stance. He often painted the brutality and inhumanity of ancient Indian sacrifice. Aztec culture for Orozco was cruel, bloodthirsty, and barbaric. He illustrates a scene of priests holding a victim’s body from which a priest is about to tear out the heart. Spanish conquest was also cruel and bloodthirsty, according to Orozco’s images, but it brought the redeeming quality of a

higher level of civilization and of Christianity, which Orozco compared favorably (in his Hospicio de Cabañas epic mural cycle) to the ancient religions.

Clearly neither Diego Rivera's unqualified indigenista idealization of Indian cultures nor Orozco's hispanista condemnation of Indian barbarism reflect historic accuracy. What teachers can extract from these representations are the *modern* interpretations of the past that accurately reflect a clash of ideologies in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Mexico.

Many of Rivera's murals show that his indigenism was not just historical. It was intimately tied to the interests of modern Indians and mestizos who had been exploited and abused not only during the 300 years of the Conquest, but by large landowners, the Church, and commercial enterprises during the Independence period up to the Revolution. Two of the most important planks of the 1917 Constitution dealt with agrarian reform and the rights of labor unions. Thus Rivera's mural in the Hospital de la Raza deals with modern medical treatment by the Social Security system as well as the medicinal practices of the indigenist past. Presided over by Tlazolteotl, goddess of creation, the earth, fertility, and carnal love, and recreated from the Codex Borbonicus, the indigenous section is an excellent index for teaching this aspect of pre-Columbian culture. The modern section shows medical care available to contemporary Mexicans who are both Indian and mestizo. But even this aspect has been idealized; the greater portion of the Mexican people today are not covered by Social Security, and thus care is not the norm, but the aspiration.

David Alfaro Siqueiros, youngest of the tres grandes, took a different approach to indigenist themes. He did not recreate archeologically accurate visions of the ancient world but used the indigenous motifs as allegories or metaphors for contemporary struggles. In two heroic images of Cuauhtemoc, the last of the Aztec emperors becomes a symbol for heroic resistance against invaders across time. These murals were painted in 1941 and 1944, during the period of World

War II; they were meant to indicate that even overwhelmingly powerful forces could be defeated through resistance. *Death to the Invader* has reference to the invading Axis powers in Europe and Asia while *Cuauhtemoc Against the Myth* refers to the myth of Spanish invincibility. Though the original Cuauhtemoc was killed, Siqueiros shows him conquering the Spaniards. Not the historical Cuauhtemoc, but the symbolic one is important.

## Mestizaje

The Conquest brought the mingling of the races; it produced the mestizo who is referred to as the fusion of the Indian and the Spaniard. Actually mestizaje in Mexico (as in other American countries like Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, the Caribbean, and the United States) included intermixture with Africans who were brought in as slaves after the decimation of the Indians. Though modern murals do not often deal with this aspect, the colonial period produced a whole series of paintings that carefully delineated the various crossings with appropriate names for each caste.

Rufino Tamayo in *Birth of Our Nationality* treats the merging of two peoples in a poetic manner. His large Picassoesque horse of the Conquest with a multi-armed figure on its back (the Spaniard) is framed by a Renaissance column on one side (European civilization) and a pre-Columbian moon/sun symbol on the other. Amid broken blocks of buildings (the destroyed Indian civilizations), an Indian woman gives birth to a child which is half red and half white. Deep rich color and the mythic quality of the figures gives a mysterious and dream-like quality to the event. It is non-narrative; fixed in time like a fable from the past that has eternal verity.

Orozco deals with mestizaje in terms of known historical personages, Cortés and Malinche. Malinche (Malintzin, or Doña Marina) was a Nahuatl and Maya-speaking Indian woman who became Cortés' guide and translator and helped him conquer the imperial Aztecs. She was also his mistress; their son represents the mestizaje of the upper classes, the

descendents of Spaniards and Indians who were often incorporated into the Mexican ruling class. In Orozco's image, the two nude figures—like the Adam and Eve of Mexican nationality, as Octavio Paz considers them—are seated together and are of equal size. White and brown color and European and Indian features are accentuated for contrast. Their hands are clasped in union, however Cortés is obviously dominant: his foot (and their union) rests on the fallen body of an Indian.

Rivera approaches the same theme in a more historical, narrative, and accurate vein that is neither poetic nor exalted. Within the context of the armed conflict of the Conquest, he picks out a small detail in which an anonymous Spanish soldier rapes an anonymous Indian woman. For the vast majority, this is how much mestizaje occurred.

### **Revolutionary History**

Among the educative concerns of the Mexican muralists were a reordering and revision of Mexican history from a revolutionary point of view. Like Mexican American scholars and artists today, who are revising U.S. history by mandating the inclusion of Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans as the original occupants and the bearers of culture, so did Mexican intellectuals and artists in the 1920s challenge the European-oriented historical view. History did not begin with the "discovery" of the Americas by Spaniards or Englishmen; they were simply the latest comers who chose, on the whole, to ignore or disparage the millenia of cultures and civilizations that had preceeded them. By the same token, the Mexican muralists did not choose to represent Mexican history as a succession of colonial aristocrats or post-Independence rulers, but as a series of insurgencies and revolutions by the Mexican people and their leaders against colonizers and dictators.

The central portion of Rivera's epic mural at the National Palace recreates conflicts from the Conquest to the revolutions of 1810 and 1910. Though his theme is conflict, move-



ment and violence are only in the Conquest scenes; the later periods are presented in a static manner with a dense cubistically-composed piling up of human forms, many of them historical portraits in shallow space. Porfirio Díaz can be seen surrounded by his científicos, military men and the clergy. Behind him are the haciendas of Mexican landowners and the buildings of the Pierce Oil Company of London, a reference to foreign capital exploiting Mexican natural resources during the Díaz dictatorship. The revolutionary opposition appears on the other side; among them Pancho Villa, Zapata, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, members of the Serdán family who fired the first shots of the 1910 Revolution, Ricardo Flores Magón, Francisco Madero, and caricaturist José Guadalupe Posada.

Siqueiros' treatment of the same subject also shows the alliance between Porfirio Díaz, the Mexican upper class, and the military, but in a more dynamic composition that openly confronts the ruling with the working class. His theme is a particular historical event: the 1906 strike by Mexican workers against the Cananea Consolidated Copper Co. located in Sonora, Mexico, and owned by a North American, William Greene, known as the "copper king of Sonora." This event was one of several believed to have triggered the Mexican Revolution.

### **International Issues**

The Mexican mural movement (which has been represented here only by the tres grandes, but which had a large following) did not limit itself to national issues; its view was international in scope. In the 1920s, Rivera and Siqueiros were members of the Mexican Communist Party. They had an unreserved admiration for the Soviet Union, whose revolution occurred seven years after the Mexican. Rivera's views later underwent a major change when his friendship for Leon Trotsky and his anti-Stalinism grew. However, he and Siqueiros remained strong advocates of socialism—not an uncommon phenomenon in the 1920s and 1930s. Orozco was

an iconoclast; he was critical but not unsympathetic in these early years. The contrasting views of Rivera and Orozco in the mid-1930s are instructive.

Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads* was originally painted in Rockefeller Center, New York, under the sponsorship of Nelson Rockefeller. The inclusion of Lenin's portrait was too upsetting for Rockefeller and the tenants of the center. The mural was covered and then destroyed, so Rivera repainted it in the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City. Surrounding the central motif of a Russian workman at the controls of the universe are the worlds of capitalism (soldiers with gas masks, unemployed strikers attacked by the police, the rich gathered around festive tables) and of socialism (joyous youth, Lenin as a symbol of world brotherhood). In this mural, Rivera reflects the realities and horrors of World War I, which were still fresh in memory, and the Depression during which the mural was painted. Nevertheless, Rivera applies the same utopian vision that informed his treatment of indigenist themes to this new work. By 1933 Lenin was dead, and Trotsky, after disagreements with the Stalin government, had been exiled. The only indication of this rift is the pointed inclusion of Trotsky's portrait and the exclusion of Stalin's beside the figures of Marx and Engels in the socialist half of the mural.

Orozco's New York murals of the same period feature three heroic leaders with their followers: the assassinated Maya governor of Yucatan, Felipe Carrillo Puerto; the assassinated Lenin; and the Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi in his confrontation with British imperialism. With Gandhi was one of the few women Orozco placed in a heroic light, Madam Sarojini Naidu. Though Carrillo Puerto and Lenin occupy similar spaces and elevation in the mural, individualized followers surround Carrillo Puerto while Lenin appears above robotized masked soldiers with ranks of sharp bayonets. Through this subtle difference, Orozco could heroize the individual without necessarily accepting the society he constructed. This illustrates Orozco's philosophy in general; he

distrusted masses of people and looked in a Nietzschean manner to individual supermen for social reform or salvation.

After Siqueiros returned to Mexico from the Spanish Civil War, he painted a complex mural on the walls, windows, and ceiling of a staircase in a trade union building. For him, the world scene looked bleak. Spain had been the proving ground for nazi and fascist militarism; the Civil War presaged World War II. While the Axis consolidated its power in Europe and Asia, the Western nations adhered to a "neutrality" and appeasement policy, which brought down the Republican government in Spain, and allowed Hitler access to European conquest. Siqueiros had no sympathy for either the Axis or the Allies. Beneath a huge steel-plated eagle/dive bomber in his mural, he painted an anthropomorphic machine that turns human blood from war victims into gold coins (profits from munitions on both sides). On one side are the British, French, and U.S. allies; on the other are the Japanese, German, and Italian. On the left wall, a parrot-like demagogue waves a fiery torch while masses of soldiers march; on the right, as a symbol of opposition, is a powerful figure of the people's resistance.

For U.S. historians and teachers, Siqueiros' mural highlights a moment in time that tends to be overlooked in the subsequent unity of World War II: that period between the fall of Spain to Franco in 1939, and the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 which finally brought together the United States, the Soviet Union, England, France, and many other countries (including Mexico) against fascism. For artists, the mural is a fascinating study of the new artistic technology developed by Siqueiros (synthetic paints, spray gun application on a wall, documentary photography incorporated into painting) and new formal methods (filmic movement on a static painted surface, illusionistic destruction of architectural space, creation of a containing "environment"). Many of these means presage artistic directions explored in the United States in the 1960s.

For all their power and command of pictorial means,

Rivera's and Orozco's methods and expression were far more traditional, though all three shared revolutionary, social content. Perhaps this is one reason why Rivera and Orozco were the major influences on U.S. and South American artists until World War II, and Siqueiros was the most admired and copied by the U.S. street mural movement of the sixties and seventies.

Before leaving Mexican terrain, one must note that issues and attitudes are changed and reinterpreted with time. In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, the muralists and other cultural workers were aware of the need to create a new formal and thematic language in the interests of social change. New aspects of history were to be emphasized, new heroic figures to be given prominence, and new views of social relationships to be advanced. This language would reflect political concepts that emerged from the revolutionary process: agrarian reform, labor rights, separation of church and state, Mexican hegemony over natural resources, defense against foreign economic penetration, and literacy and education for the masses.

Sixty years have passed since the termination of the Revolution. The Mexican state, economy, political structure, and international role have changed. Much revolutionary oratory has become rhetoric in the speeches of government functionaries. Younger generations of artists have reexamined and are revising concepts of the traditional heroes. For example, two murals on revolutionary themes face each other in a salon of the National History Museum in Chapultepec Park, Mexico City. One, by Jorge Gonzalez Camarena, is a mannered, heroicized portrait of Venustiano Carranza, revolutionary general and early president of Mexico. Carranza at one stage fought against Zapata and was responsible for his assassination. Zapata had accused him of deceit and hypocrisy for preaching and not practicing agrarian reform. Directly opposite the Camarena mural is one by a much younger artist, Arnold Belkin. He confronts the Carranza portrait with one of Zapata and Pancho Villa derived from a

famous Casasola photograph. The irony of the placement has not escaped Belkin. In addition, the figures of Zapata and Villa have the flesh stripped away as if the artist intends to demythologize them as well as Carranza.

In a similar vein is Felipe Ehrenberg's easel painting/collage of Carranza and Zapata. In it Carranza appears twice: once as a general with the Mexican flag substituted for his face as though his true features are hidden behind his patriotism and again as president where he is superimposed over the body and face of Zapata. Carranza destroyed the man, but he absorbed his legendary aura. Beneath each figure is a ruler to take anew the measure of history and mythology.

The Mexican muralists accepted the role (as Jean Franco said in her book *The Modern Culture of Latin America*) of "guide, teacher and conscience of (their) country" and produced an art which played a social role. The very choice of means—muralism—underscores their consciousness of this role since the technique and form is public and not conducive to the expression of subjective or introspective material. It served the needs of the time objectively. It created a new plastic language, a new ideology, and a new iconography. For the first time, the anonymous peoples of Mexico appeared in art, not as quaint or exotic subjects for genre paintings, but as heroes taking control of their own destinies: Orozco's villagers marching off to the Revolution; Rivera's masses of farmers receiving the divided lands of the great estates; Siqueiros' workers creating unions in order to benefit from the riches of their own lands. With them are the leaders who aligned with them or came from their own ranks.

## South America

The 1920s, a period of reassessment and reevaluation of European values, followed the devastation and slaughter of World War I. Until then, these values had been considered the acme of civilization. Europeans (and some Latin Americans) turned to Dada, a self-mocking, iconoclastic movement

which questioned existing mores, customs, and the nature of culture itself. The Americas, from the United States to South America, turned inward upon their own resources in an exuberant expression of nationalism and regionalism and sought values indigenous to their own continent. In the United States, this took a politically isolationist form and an artistic celebration of varied regions of the nation known as Regionalism. Among Afro-Americans from the Caribbean, Brazil and Harlem came the celebration of "negritude" and the search for a national identity. In Mexico, Guatemala, and the Andean area, nationalism took the form of indigenism—ancient and modern—tied to contemporary social reform. Artists and writers sought to cut their dependence on European models and develop their own artistic vocabulary and themes; they naturally turned to the Mexican muralists, particularly Rivera who was known internationally, for inspiration. Many traveled to Mexico to study. However, with the exception of U.S. artists who worked in Mexico and assisted with, or studied the murals done by Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in many cities of the United States during the 1930s, few artists had the opportunity to do murals. The social conditions, including government commissions and support, conducive to monumental public art existed only in Mexico and in the U.S. of the New Deal. In other areas, relatively few murals were executed, and no opportunity existed for a national mural movement as in Mexico. Primarily, the Mexican influence can be seen in easel paintings, sometimes monumental in size. To my knowledge, no thorough study of modern Mexican influence on Latin American art has yet been compiled; a similar study of the Mexican influence in the U.S. has only just gotten underway. At this stage, any conclusions must be tentative. Nevertheless, stylistic, thematic, and some documentary evidence exists on Mexican influence in South America.

Two easel paintings by Cuban artists illustrate this influence. Abela's *Guajiros* and Carreño's *Sugar Cane Cutters* deal with rural workers. Abela's is similar to Rivera's stocky,

simplified, and static figures and Carreño's is influenced by Siqueiros stylistically and in the use of Duco, an automobile lacquer which Siqueiros adapted to fine art use in the 1930s.

Cândido Portinari, universally recognized as Brazil's greatest modern artist, was among several young artists in the 1930s committed to dealing with Brazilian social problems and contemporary life. His large painting *Coffee* brought him international recognition. The use of space, the simplification of figures, compositional devices, and the exaggeration of bodily proportions show Rivera's influence. Portinari painted many important murals at the Ministry of Education in Rio de Janeiro, the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., the Pampulha Church in Belo Horizonte, and the United Nations. He continued to paint sugar and coffee workers, slum dwellers, Negroes, mulattos, whites, Indians, and other typically Brazilian subjects. *Burial in a Net* is part of a series of paintings dealing with a terrible drought in Northeastern Brazil during the 1940s; it has elements of Picasso as well as the tragic expressiveness of Orozco.

In 1933, Siqueiros visited Buenos Aires where, assisted by several local artists, he painted an experimental mural called *Plastic Exercise*. Among the artists was Antonio Berni whose huge oil paintings, such as *Unemployment* of 1935, express his social realist concerns, though the style is not indebted to Siqueiros. In 1946, Berni was one of a group of artists who did frescoes in an arcade in Buenos Aires (the others were Colmeiro, Urruchua, Spilimbergo and Castagnino). Berni's monumental images in his two murals at this location owe a debt to Orozco and to the Italian Renaissance. Muralism, however, did not flourish in Argentina. There were no opportunities to do murals. As Berni stated in 1979, no revolution had taken place and there was no interest in public art. The immense size of his canvases seem to express a frustration with the lack of walls.

In Peru, with a larger Indian population, Mexican indigenism and social realism flourished. In 1922, José Sabogal

visited Mexico where the impact of the muralists turned him into an ardent indigenist and nationalist. His influence produced a school of painters, among them Teodoro Nuñez Ureta who shows the distinct influence of Orozco in his *Transmission of the Seed* and that of Siqueiros in *Allegory of Production and Work*. Nuñez's heroic treatment of indigenist and working class themes places him in the social realist tradition of the Mexican School.

César Rengifo of Venezuela has been a social realist since the 1930s. He did one tile mural in Caracas on an indigenous theme; but realistic public art had few patrons in Venezuela. One exception is the case of Héctor Poleo who studied mural painting in Mexico in the late 1930s. He was influenced by Rivera, and executed a mural for the new University City in Caracas. Since the 1950s, geometric abstraction and kineticism have dominated Venezuelan art; thoroughly cosmopolitan art forms which reflect the urban-industrial development of Caracas that resulted from the discovery of large oil deposits in 1938 and 1973. Both Poleo and Rengifo dealt with the desolate life of the rural hinterlands (in contrast to the capital city, Caracas) primarily in easel paintings like Rengifo's *Settlement of Peons* and *What the Petroleum Has Left Us: Dogs*.

### **Chicano Muralism of the 1970s**

Between the 1940s and the 1960s, public muralism in the United States suffered an eclipse. The New Deal art projects were terminated in the forties, and artists turned to other pursuits for the duration of World War II. In the complacent, prosperous, and individualistic fifties—overshadowed by the cold war and McCarthyism—introspective easel painting flourished, dominated by abstract expressionism. New York became the art capital of the world and centralized arbiter of taste in the United States. Critics fulminated against “narrative, propagandistic” art and attacked “literary content” in painting. Representational art in general faced lean times. Art history was revised as the Mexican School, South American social realism, U.S. Regionalism, and New



Deal art were written out of the history books. Only in the mid-seventies have these movements been reassessed and reintegrated into art history as a number of authors began to publish books on the New Deal and as regional exhibitions of New Deal art took place. The issue of regionality in art, of the validity of artistic pluralism in the United States, of resistance to the absolute dominance of New York's establishment over the nation has now come into focus.\*

One of the key factors promoting this new decentralizing of artistic focus, reevaluating of the 1930s, and burgeoning interest in the art of Latin America and Latinos in the United States, is the street mural movement of which Chicano muralism has played a quantitative and qualitative part. The outdoor muralists turned to the Mexicans as an important source of knowledge, technique, concept, style, and inspiration. Nowhere was this more culturally important than among Chicanos for whom the recovery of Mexican muralism was part of a larger recovery of heritage and identity after a century of deliberate deculturalization by the dominant society. Looking at this last statement with a finer lens, however, research still in its initial stages suggests that the deprivation of Mexican models for Mexican American artists is only two decades old, and applies to those artists who came to their calling during the hegemony of abstract expressionism or the "art-for-art's sake" dictums of the art schools. The process of revitalizing the work of the Mexican muralists (as well as of younger artists) in the United States and making it available to artists of the 1960s and 1970s was the result of efforts by Chicano Studies programs and mural groups in the Southwest and Midwest, and the establishment of alternative

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\*Three issues of *Art in America* reflect this new consciousness: the July-August 1972 special issue on the American Indian; the May-June 1974 issue dealing with public art, women's art, and street murals (hitherto an "invisible" category) across the country; and the July-August 1976 "Art Across America" issue whose cover is dominated by Texas artist Luis Jiménez's sculpture, and whose perspective is epitomized by Donald B. Kuspit's article "Regionalism Reconsidered."

Chicano cultural structures which researched and disseminated information about Mexican art.

In this brief consideration of Chicano muralism as influenced by the Mexican mural movement, there are examples of the transformation of themes that were important to the Mexicans at an earlier date and that were charged with new meanings and implications within the context of contemporary Chicano concerns. For example, the initial cultural-nationalist phase of Chicano consciousness in the mid-1960s produced a wave of neo-indigenism like that of the Mexicans in the 1920s but with certain important differences. First, the Americanist indigenism of the 1920s was part of an isolationist-nationalist wave following World War I. It was not necessarily exercised by the indigenous peoples themselves but by intellectuals on their behalf. Present neo-indigenism has made links with people of color throughout the developing Third World, and it is being promoted by the affected groups: Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans. Second, Rivera's indigenism responded to a largely agricultural nation where the landless or small farmers, Indian and mestizo, made up a great part of the population, and where agrarian reform was a major plank of the Revolution. Though Chicanos in the Southwest also have a large rural or semi-rural population, and the unionization struggles of the United Farm Workers were a focal point in the development of Chicano culture, agrarianism is in a highly industrialized country and even agriculture is a big business. Therefore, little probability exists that Chicanos would or could be the small farmers the Zapatistas aspired to be.

One of the earliest and strongest proponents of neo-indigenism was Luis Valdez of Teatro Campesino. He drew upon his interpretation of pre-Columbian religion to provide a non-European spiritual base for Chicano life. However, Valdez turned to this source at the point when he began to address urban Chicanos as well as farm workers. He himself was urbanized through long residence in big California cities. The same is true of Chicano poets Alurista of San Diego,

California and Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales of Denver, important figures in the popularization of neo-indigenism.

Another point of differentiation was the exclusively pre-Columbian focus of the cultural-nationalist phase; the fraternity between mestizo Chicanos and Native Americans based on a commonality of "race" and oppression within the Anglo-dominated society did not occur until later. Mexico, on the other hand, has been a mestizo and Indian nation since the Conquest; indigenism in the 1920s served to emphasize that national fact. Mestizos and Indians were the *majority*, not the minority, and artists addressed their present problems.

Two Chicano murals, one from Los Angeles and the other from Denver, are taken directly from pre-Columbian sources; they are copied uncritically without concern for historical context. Charles Félix recreates in color a sacrifice scene from a ballcourt relief sculpture at El Tajín, Veracruz. Sánchez reproduces the single figure of the goddess Tlazolteotl—the same used as a central figure by Rivera in his Hospital de la Raza mural on ancient and modern medicine. Rivera related pre-Columbian to modern medicine as a continuum, the patients being Indians of the past and present. The murals by Félix and Sánchez are essentially decorative and unselective about content—surely Félix did not intend to glorify human sacrifice.

*La Mujer*, an enormous collectively-painted mural in Hayward, California, uses a variety of motifs that mingle the pre-Columbian with contemporary urban problems. The central female figure with tripartite head and powerful out-thrust arms is adapted from Siqueiros' 1944 *New Democracy* in the Palace of Fine Arts, Mexico City. On one side of the Hayward mural are the evils of the big city: contaminated food, arson, violence in the streets, drug abuse, and others. One of the great arms holds a destructive hammer over these scenes. The other arm terminates in a wheel incorporating the four elements; the Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban and Pan-African flags; and peace symbols of the Native American. Pre-Columbian figures intertwine with death and

destruction on the left; and with corn, peace, and growth on the right. Thus the indigenous motifs are selectively chosen and thematically enhancing.

Another elaboration of this kind which creatively adapts motifs and formal elements from indigenous sources and the Mexican muralists is *Song of Unity* in Berkeley, California. Its point of departure is contemporary social song (called *nueva cancion* in Latin America) in North and South America, and therefore its central motif is a double image of eagle and condor. The mural has an irregular billboard-like cutout surface. One side of the mural pictures North American musicians and songwriters like Daniel Valdez, Malvina Reynolds, and jazz musicians; the other side features the peoples of Latin America, particularly the Andean Indians. All the figures are dramatically foreshortened in space and seem to thrust from the surface in a manner typical of Siqueiros' paintings. Also adopted from Siqueiros' sculpture-painting technique is the dominant figure of the mural which is modeled three-dimensionally and projects in relief from the surface. This is an image of Chilean songwriter Victor Jara who was killed by the military junta during the fall of the Allende government in 1973. His severed hands continue to play a guitar, while the peoples of South America with their regional instruments march through his transparent mutilated arm.

In Houston, Texas, muralist Leo Tanguma painted an enormous mural called *Rebirth of Our Nationality*. A Chicano man and woman emerge from a large red flower which rests in a bleak landscape on a platform of skulls. They are under the banner "To Become Aware of Our History is to Become Aware of Our Singularity." From either side, brown skinned figures, who represent the multiplicity of Mexican peoples and the complexity of their history and struggles in Mexico and the United States, drive toward the central inspiration of their rebirth. The dramatic thrust of the composition and the violent expressionism of the figures owe a debt to Siqueiros and Orozco—whom the artist has long admired. The social

responsibility of the artist to his community is a philosophy Tanguma derived from Siqueiros, whom he met personally.

Marcos Raya of Chicago has borrowed figures from Orozco and the major composition of Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads* for his mural *Homage to Diego Rivera*. He has substituted Mayor Daly of Chicago for the central figure of the worker in the original mural and surrounded him with images of corruption and violence.

Chicano murals exist in all states of the Southwest, as well as the Midwest/Great Lakes region. California has more than 1,000, scattered in cities and some rural areas. Texas has murals in Austin, San Antonio, Houston, Crystal City, El Paso, and other locations. No single style unites them; their commonalty, to the degree that it exists, derives from thematic factors and what might be called "the Chicano point of view," a difficult thing to define and one that, even now, is undergoing transformation. Their commonalty derives from life experiences common to Chicanos living in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century; those Mexicans who are expressing a growing awareness of their long history on both sides of the present border. Murals also include the process of redefining and changing that history and education has played no small role in that process.

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