

The Mexican Muralists in the United States: Ancient Imagery, Modern Technology, International Relations

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Vocabulary:

Mexican Muralism A movement beginning in the early 1920s in Mexico in which the government commissioned artists to make art that would educate the mostly illiterate population about the country's history and present a powerful vision of its future. The movement followed the Mexican Revolution. Inspired by the idealism of the Revolution, artists created epic, politically charged public murals that stressed Mexico's pre-colonial history and culture and that depicted peasants, workers, and people of mixed Indian-European heritage as the heroes who would forge its future. The murals were executed in techniques including fresco, encaustic, mosaic, and relief. José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros were considered the leaders of the Mexican Muralism. (From Museum of Modern Art website)

Works Discussed:

Coatlicue statue – Created by Aztec (Mexico) craftsmen, ca. 1490. Approx. 8' tall and may weigh as much as 12-13 tons. Created in Pre-Spanish era, discovered under paving stones of Main Plaza (Zócalo) in Mexico City in 1790.

Teotihuacan murals – Painted in fresco technique at ancient city of Teotihuacan near Mexico City, ca. 400-700 CE.

José Clemente Orozco:

--Frescoes at Pomona College, Pomona, CA, 1930 - *Prometheus*

--**The New School for Social Research, New York, NY, 1930-'31**

-- *Science, Labor, and Art*

--*Table of Universal Brotherhood*

--*Struggle in the Orient: Mexico and the Soviet Union*

--Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, 1932-'34

--*Ancient Human Sacrifice* (Part of the Epic of American Civilization mural cycle)

Diego Rivera:

--Detroit Museum of Art, Detroit, MI, 1932-'33 – *Detroit Industry*

--Golden Gate Exposition, San Francisco, CA, 1939-'40 – *Pan-American Unity*

David Alfaro Siqueiros:

--Italian Hall, Olvera Street, Los Angeles, CA, 1932 – *Tropical America: Oppressed and Destroyed by Imperialisms*

Cf: Saturnino Herrán, *Our Gods*, Mural project in Mexico City and Aguascalientes, Mexico, 1915-'18

Key figures:

José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949): José Clemente Orozco was a caricaturist, printmaker, painter, and muralist. Born in Ciudad Guzmán, Orozco became an integral part of the Mexican Muralism Movement in the 1920s. The movement, which began after the Mexican Revolution, included public murals commissioned by the government to capture the country's history. Orozco, along with Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros—the “Big Three”—created large-scale public works with political and mythological themes. Orozco's art chronicled and critiqued social change in both Mexico and the United States. (From National Gallery of Art website)

Diego Rivera (1886-1957): At the height of his career, Diego Rivera was an international art celebrity. Trained at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, he spent more than a decade in Europe, becoming a leading figure in Paris's vibrant international community of avant-garde artists. There, he developed his own brand of cubism infused with symbols of his Mexican national identity. After his return to Mexico in 1922, he joined fellow creative thinkers and state officials in concerted efforts to revitalize and redefine Mexican culture in the wake of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), a decade-long conflict that killed more than a million citizens.

Along with contemporaries like [José Clemente Orozco](#) and [David Alfaro Siqueiros](#), Rivera stood out as one of the best-known proponents of Mexican Muralism, a state-sponsored movement aimed at extolling the nation's history, culture, and post-Revolutionary ideals in large-scale murals for public spaces. Using a centuries-old fresco technique, Rivera created sweeping mural cycles that drew upon modernist painting styles to render heroic visions of Mexico's past and present that captured the attention of critics and onlookers internationally. His monumental frescos in sites like the Secretaría de Educación Pública in Mexico City (1923–28), the Escuela Nacional de Chapingo (1927), the Palacio Nacional (1929–35), and the Palacio de Cortés in Cuernavaca (1930) captured the attention of critics and onlookers from Buenos Aires to Moscow.

Artists and audiences in the United States were particularly receptive of Rivera's work and ideas. He began traveling north of Mexico's borders with his wife, the painter [Frida Kahlo](#), in 1930, and over the next five years completed major mural cycles in San Francisco, Detroit, and New York, becoming a true international art celebrity. (From Museum of Modern Art website)

David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974): Born in Chihuahua, in the north of Mexico, in 1911 Siqueiros started attending Academia de San Carlos art school in Mexico City. At the age of eighteen, he joined Venustiano Carranza to fight in the Mexican Revolution. In 1921 he traveled to Europe, first to Paris where he was exposed to cubism. He then met Diego Rivera and traveled with him in Italy. He embraced painting and political causes as one. He participated in the Spanish Civil War fighting with the Republicanos, and he had a very active agenda as a member of the Communist Party. He believed art should be for the people and not for the bourgeoisie. He spent time in several countries along the American continent, where he got in touch with other artists with leftist ideology, organizing workshops and spreading what he believed was the revolutionary potential of mural painting. He painted *América tropical* in the United States (1932), *Ejercicio Plástico* in Argentina (1933), *Muerte al invasor* in Chile (1941), and *Alegoría de la igualdad y confraternidad de las razas blanca y negra* in Cuba (1943). He

was an innovator in terms of the use of materials and tools. Thus, from the 1930s, he experimented with industrial paint (Duco) and also used stencils, airbrush, and celluloid rulers. He was sent to prison on four occasions because of his political activities. (Adapted from Organization of American States website.)

Coatlicue (ca. 1490-present): The Aztec/Mexica people believed that the earth goddess, Coatlicue (her name means “Snakes Her Skirt”) was sweeping in the temple of Coatepec (“Snake Mountain”) when she found a ball of down and tucked it into her shirt. Later, she was unable to find the feathers, but realized she was miraculously pregnant. Her daughter, Coyoxauhqui (“Bells on her cheeks”) and her 400 sons were upset that their mother had become pregnant without an obvious father, and plotted to kill her. However, just at the moment they attacked her, decapitating her, she gave birth to her fully grown and armed son Huitzilopochtli (“Hummingbird of the South/the Left”). He attacked his siblings, breaking up his sister’s body. Her head went up into the sky to become the moon and his many brothers became the stars.

The large statue of Coatlicue from the Main Plaza of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, was created in the later years of the Aztec empire (ca. 1325-1521). It was pushed or rolled off the Aztecs’ Main Temple in the Spanish invasion of 1520, and rediscovered 270 years later, in 1790, during work on the drainage system of the Zócalo, or main plaza of what was then Mexico City. The statue was moved to the patio of the nearby National University. However, Indigenous people kept visiting and even leaving offerings for the statue, upsetting the colonial authorities, who ultimately reburied the statue in the courtyard. After Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821, the statue took on importance as a national monument, and took on increasing importance for artists and intellectuals following the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20. Today, the statue is on view as one of the most important monuments of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

For Further Reading / Resources:

--Barbara Haskell et al, *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2020.

--Alejandro Anreus, *Orozco in Gringoland: The Years in New York*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001.

--James Oles, *Diego Rivera’s America*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2022.

--Philip Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*, New York: International Publishers, 1994.

--James Oles, *Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011.