

# The forgotten muralists

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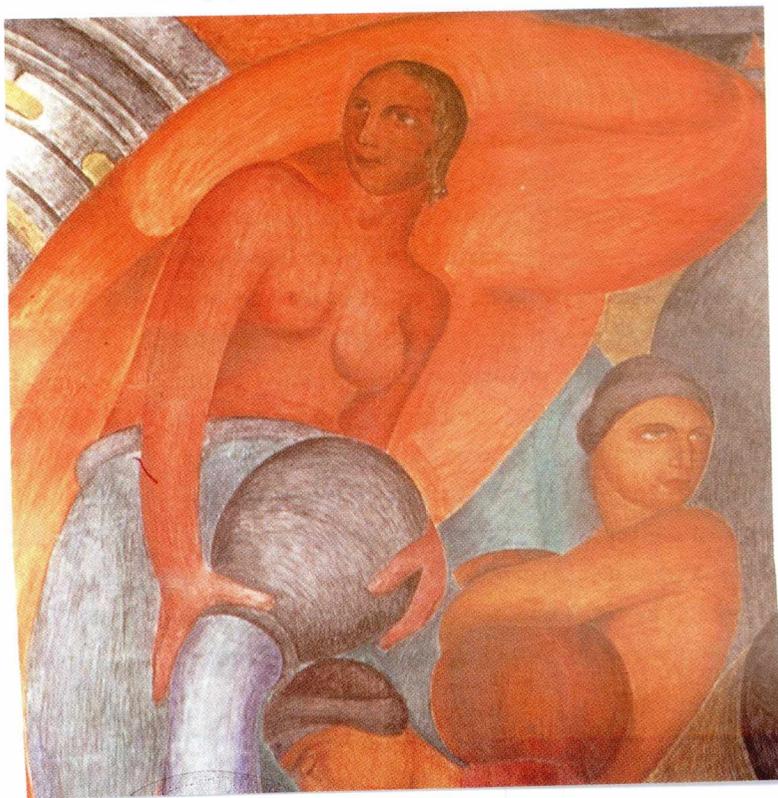
Any discussion of Mexican muralism's golden age brings to the fore the great figures of that threesome of militant and charismatic painters who expressed, on the walls of public buildings, the cultural and social concerns of the post-Revolutionary era: Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Yet —despite these artists' fascinating personalities and the unquestionable quality of their work— we should not forget the others who, to a greater or lesser degree, contributed to the nationalist school of which mural painting was one of the foremost expressions. These individuals were also witnesses and protagonists, who travelled different paths in order to come together in a common front in the visual arts. Their work should be viewed as an alternative current, with its own values and qualities.

The muralist movement had various peak moments in terms of its expressive capacity and the aesthetic quality of the works it produced. It passed through several decades, continuing even after the so-called post-Revolutionary era, transforming its precepts and proposals in line with the social and stylistic requirements of the times. The vastness of the mural work carried out in Mexico over the course of the 20th century calls for constant review and a range

of different readings, providing new viewpoints on this important aesthetic-social phenomenon.

Muralism arose in response to an imperious social demand. This doubtless accounts for part of its expressive power and historical legitimacy. In 1922 José Vasconcelos, who had recently been appointed Secretary of Public Education, hired the best painters of the day to “decorate” the walls of public buildings devoted to education and the propagation of culture. The aim was certainly an ambitious one: to extend education to a populace 80 percent of which was illiterate, by means of the visual exaltation of historical episodes and values, above all those related to the

Fermin Revueltas, *Allegory of Industry*, 1922.



Photos: Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, UNAM

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Juan O'Gorman, *Francisco I. Madero*.

recently concluded armed revolution and its goals of social justice. The Revolution was still part of living memory, and it was deemed necessary to entrench it in the collective myths which constitute the physiognomy of peoples, and to make it a force for cohesion deriving from a common past and a shared future.

The Secretary of Education did not put forward any aesthetic theory which would have limited the painters' creative freedom. All he asked for were huge painted surfaces and quick work, given the pressing nature of the objectives being pursued. This was one of the reasons why this first stage in the movement developed within an eclectic framework, based largely on the great themes of Western art with an admixture of concepts from theosophy, esotericism, mysticism and other doctrines of Oriental inspiration. At the same time, one notes traces of *fin de siècle* art in the schemas of formal representation and subject

matter characteristic of Modernism. This is clear in the first set of mural paintings carried out by Dr. Atl, Roberto Montenegro, Jorge Enciso, Xavier Guerrero, Gabriel Fernández Ledesma and Julio Castellanos in the former College of St. Peter and Paul—a building which had been reclaimed in order to provide headquarters for a "Free Discussion Hall."

From that point onwards one decoration project followed another, multiplying the number and quality of ideas, forms and colors appearing in the images painted on city walls. The National Preparatory School, the Secretariat of Public Education, the Benito Juárez primary school and the Abelardo Rodríguez market provided spaces where young painters, most of whom served as assistants to the great masters, carried out work which was simultaneously parallel and alternate, with its own values and qualities. Among the most outstanding of these young artists were Fermín



Jorge González Camarena, *The Fusion of Two Cultures*.

Revueltas, Ramón Alva de la Canal, Fernando Leal, Jean Charlot, Pablo O'Higgins, Leopoldo Méndez, Alfredo Zalce, the Greenwood sisters, Ramón Alva Guadarrama, Raúl Anguiano and Jorge González Camarena.

The first themes were related to historical subjects, *costumbrismo* (local customs and manners), as well as an interest in local landscape and human types. The new subjects of history also came forward, with the working class of the cities and countryside featuring as protagonist, represented through new forms and colors with a new expressiveness and characteristics that identified these works as "Mexican painting." All of this was within the framework of a critical attitude towards the social issues of the day and a clear intention of becoming involved in more or less explicit political commitment.

During the 1950s, the trend called *Integración plástica* (integration of the visual arts) injected new life into muralism, which was now conceived of as going hand in hand with architecture, as part of a "developmentalist" outlook that regarded the post-Revolutionary era as having come to an end. University City was the crowning work of this project, in which such painters as Francisco Eppens, José Chávez Morado, Juan

O'Gorman and Carlos Mérida played a leading role, together with others from later generations.

Thus, large-scale painting was attractive for different reasons and during different historical periods. The monumentality which characterizes this kind of work certainly emphasizes the effect of its messages, which may be why this medium has been so prodigiously cultivated in Mexican art. Also, a large number of mural paintings have disappeared due to a range of causes, leaving both questions and gaps in the decoration of many buildings.

Mural painting also presented a broad and complex vista. Some of its practitioners pursued purely artistic values, related to a more universal humanism based on renewed values, among them Roberto Montenegro, Carlos Mérida, Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, Julio Castellanos and Arnold Belkin. Yet within this diversity there is a deep-going sense of nationalism and social conscience, which served as a unifying element in 20th-century mural painting. It was thus, by representing the ideals of an entire era, that muralism acquired far-reaching significance in Mexican art.<sup>51</sup>



Fernando Leal, *The Dancers of Chalma*.