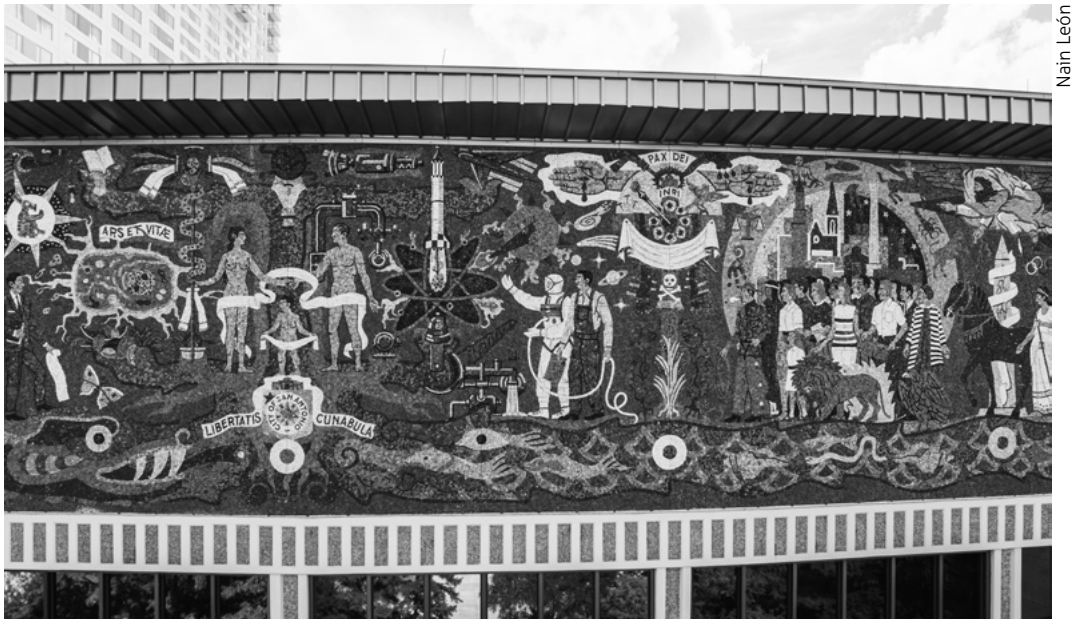

Naín León

Miguel García Audelo*

Juan O'Gorman's Mural *The Confluence of Civilizations* In San Antonio, Texas

From my point of view, the Mexican Revolution is a kind of spiral: a flat curve that indefinitely turns around a point through time like the hermeneutics that we historians make of it. As the years go by, the curved interpretations distance and project themselves in a way that is so disproportionate that its true dimensions can be disregarded. What is more, just to make the original topic of study more complex, that same curve often divides into others that follow their own paths.[1]

That would exemplify the divergent interpretations graphically and even more in post-revolutionary art with a figure like that of Juan O'Gorman (1905-1982). He is famous for his murals in Mexico, but little known for his work abroad like the mural *The Confluence of Civilizations* (1968) in San Antonio, Texas's Lila Cockrell Theater.[2] Born in the town of San Ángel, he survived the Revolution and spent his early years learning to paint with his father. Years later, when he showed great ability for art, O'Gorman became an artist and even made friends with figures like Diego Rivera, for whom he built what is now the famous Diego Rivera/Frida Kahlo House Studio Museum in 1932.[3]

However, he dedicated his youth to architecture and contributed to the Mexican government's plan to teach literacy, building about thirty-five functionalist primary schools between 1932 and 1935, which became a symbol of modernity applied to education. Although in his autobiography, he recognized that working as an architect could have given him the means to have a comfortable life, his artistic convictions prevented him from taking that road. He decided to dedicate himself to philosophical introspection and teaching at the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN), where, unfortunately, he was not very lucky and preferred to resign.[4]

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Disappointed by this, he spent the years 1942 to 1948 painting, when he produced several socially critical works. About 1950, he already enjoyed a certain reputation as a painter and architect. This led him to be commissioned, together with architects Gustavo Saabedra and Juan Martínez de Velasco, to design and build what would initially be the National Library of Mexico; over time it became the UNAM Central Library for which he used a revolutionary technique —just as all his art was revolutionary.[5]

This was when he first used his ideas to make mosaic murals on the library's blank walls. His aim was to do something completely different from the rest of the buildings in University City giving the building an authentic Mexican character. With help from a miner friend of his father, he sought out 150 kinds of stones that would create a varied color palette to bring to fruition his idea of the country's history, which he reduced to ten basic colors with which to make the mosaics.

The only color he could not find was the kind of blue he needed, since what nature provided was a too pale for his taste. For that reason, the blues found on the Central Library's walls are not stones, but ground colored glass used as if they were stones. This way, the other colors found in the states of Guerrero, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, and Zacatecas allowed him to execute the compositions on the building's exterior with the certainty that their colors would last, and nothing would dull them.

O'Gorman said at the time, "The technique used to cover 4,000 square meters is very important, since, thanks to it, this great mosaic has been preserved intact without needing the least restoration."[6] In his autobiography, he narrated the colossal construction process, which required an enormous personal effort, to the point of working up to fourteen hours a day. This was because he made many changes to the original project over the course of making the mosaic, changes needed to improve the design and the composition in order to be flexible both with the time it took and the budget.

Juan O'Gorman's technique overcame the difficulties caused by working in the open: changes in temperature, sunlight or the humidity from rainfall, preserving the colorful splendor of the mosaics illustrating Mexica history on the four sides of University City's Central Library. A great reader, O'Gorman documented the country's past, arrived at his own vision of history, and captured it on each side of the building.

The result was a historic geometry that served as public instruction, a lesson that only required that the viewer have a minimal knowledge and openness to allow the stream of the past to pass before his/her eyes and jibe with the present. In *Historical Representation of Culture*, the title under which these murals were conceived, he wanted the ancient codices to seem to unfold, so the austere library would be "embraced" by a huge canvas representing the national culture based fundamentally on Mexican history, or at least his concept of it.

Even though the Central Library was a pedagogical wonder, O'Gorman was not sure that the public —even the university community— could distinguish each of the elements it included. For this reason, he emphasized more the sense of form over the theme; that is, the form was a function of Mexican visual arts of the time. It used the essences of Mesoamerican codices, viceregal altarpieces, and the new national folklore to ensure that the work would impact the national character and be liked by the people. Or at least that the people wouldn't dislike it.[7]

Between 1960 and 1961, Juan O'Gorman's view of Mexican history found a new opportunity to condense

O'Gorman documented the country's past, arrived at his own vision of history, and captured it on each side of the building.

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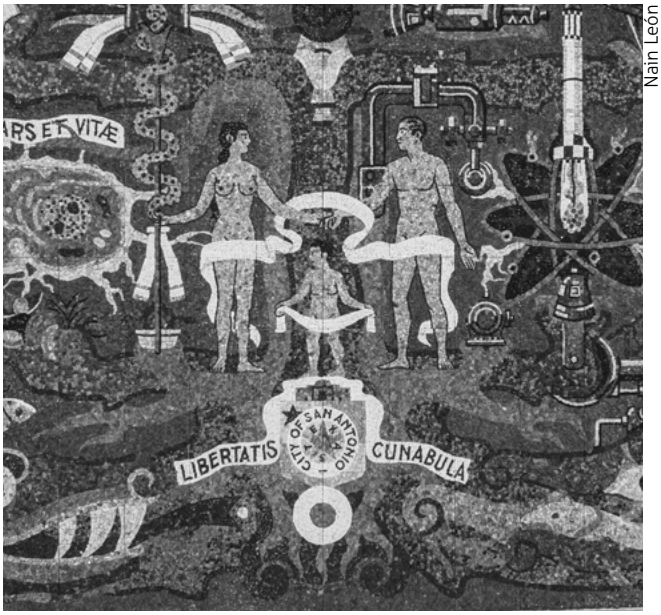

Nain León

This work of art is a story parallel to that of the UNAM San Antonio: O'Gorman is inextricably linked to the history of our alma mater just as the latter is linked to San Antonio after eighty years of being in this city.

the concepts of the national history of Man, symbol, and landscape. At Chapultepec Castle, by then turned into the National Museum of History, he painted *Reredos* about the Independence and the Revolution. These are frescos on the walls displaying once again the concept of codex to show the past, with the idea that Mexico would become conscious of it through painting, for which the people's memory would have to be reconstructed through art.

Five years later in 1966, O'Gorman was invited to Yale University as a visiting professor; there, he came into contact with other architects and learn about the U.S. educational model. The university organized a large exhibition of Latin American art in which several of his architectural pieces and murals were included, as well as two easel paintings placed in the section dedicated to Mexico. After this, he went to the University at Austin to give some lectures and finally to San Antonio, invited by entrepreneur and philanthropist Marshall T. Steves. Steves at that time headed the HemisFair '68 project, a world fair dedicated to the theme of the confluence of civilizations in the Americas, for which a complex was being built to host representations of twenty-five countries, international organizations, and private corporations. In 1966 the tower for the main exhibition, the Museum of the History of Texas, and the Convention Center was still under construction. It was this site that Marshall designated for O'Gorman to create a mural using the same technique that he had used for the UNAM Central Library.

Marshall told O'Gorman that the work would be financed by the Kampmann Foundation, a San Antonio philanthropic institution that put a lot of funding into charity works and the beautification of the city. In August 1966, Ike and Flora Kampmann, the heads of the foundation, visited O'Gorman in Mexico City to tie up the details, close the deal, and begin work. The artist named the mural *The Confluence of Civilizations*, finished his project in December 1966, and began the precasting of the 500 panels in January 1967.[8]

The work was done in the Coapa neighborhood in southern Mexico City at the workshop of muralist Jorge Best. They followed the same procedure as that used for University City's Central Library, with the only difference that the panels were smaller and that instead of using glass to get the desired blue, this time O'Gorman used enameled cobalt blue ceramic bricks, combining them with colored stone. This mixture created an extraordinary effect both in terms of strength and how it looks. In December 1967, he finished and shipped the panels by land to San Antonio.

O'Gorman went to San Antonio to work on mounting the mural together with the Convention Center engineers, but when he arrived, he realized he didn't like the building: he thought it was architecturally mediocre. In addition, the original site for placing the mural had been changed, with the effect that the work did not completely integrate with the architecture. Despite this, he thought that the mural at least was decorative and gave the building's façade certain color.

In his memoire, he briefly described the mural saying that the overarching idea was the convergence of European and American civilizations in forming a culture. Thus, it represented the influence of these cultures for the benefit of humanity.[9] On the one hand, he wrote, it showed the importance of art from the Americas, and, on the other, that of European science and technology, both coming together in a human need to forge the culture of the American hemisphere.

San Antonio was the best place to put it, since, from the time of the first contact with Europe, the conquistadors' desires for finding the Seven Cities of Gold and other marvels had centered on these latitudes.[10] During the viceroyalty, waves of indigenous, Europeans, and mestizos had arrived as missionaries, soldiers, authorities, or residents whose efforts sustained the city of San Antonio. In the nineteenth century, it was one of the few refuges for Hidalgo's rebellion, and Texas under Mexico was the objective of the U.S. Americans ceaselessly expanding their control westward.

In 1845, Texas became part of the United States, and, after that, waves of migrants from every corner of Europe began to descend on San Antonio and the new capital, making the region a point of multicultural meeting, just as Juan O'Gorman noted during his visits from 1966 and 1968. Thus, his mural showed the plurality of the society made up of individuals of such varied customs that, in their heterogeneity, they turned one of the United States' first national mottos into reality: *E pluribus unum* (Out of many, one.).[11]

This mural, like the previous ones, has a visual dynamism that offers a codex that unfolds, where the sides are opposites that move toward the center of the composition, exemplifying its essence. On the one hand, the pre-Hispanic American cultures, and on the other extreme, those of classical European antiquity. To the left, the ancestral Mesoamerican knowledge linked to nature; to the right, the intellectual and logic of Western thought. In the center is the result: a culture with a new merged character, with elements of both hemispheres.

At the center are a man and a woman, the fundamental seeds of humanity, flanked by a little boy who symbolizes the future. Under him is San Antonio's modern coat of arms, crowned by an image of the Alamo, the basis of U.S. civic mythology. It is the beginning and end of the history of the city, considered the cradle of freedom or *libertatis cunabula*, both by them and by us Mexicans: it was here that Francisco I. Madero (1873-1913) began the 1910 Revolution that O'Gorman portrayed in all his murals.

All the stone murals, using the same materials and technique, and projecting the same vision, aimed to remake the past and recover our nation's history, the fundamental premise of his thinking. In his interpretation of the past, not only do his own ideas about human civilization converge through painting, but so did the cultures harmoniously intertwined, forming the enormous spiral of history and memory that is our reality in a single visual hermeneutics.

Perhaps this is why passers-by are so surprised as the saunter along the San Antonio River Walk when they "discover" *The Confluence of Civilizations*. Mounted today on the façade of the Lila Cockrell Theater,[12] a few steps from the UNAM San Antonio headquarters, the work surprises because of its unorthodox beauty, which contrasts with other nearby pieces. And even if they are taken aback by the surprise, people cannot help but recognize the impact the artist has on the imagination of anyone who looks at the mural high up on the building.

This work of art is a story parallel to that of the UNAM San Antonio: O'Gorman is inextricably linked to the history of our alma mater just as the latter is linked to San Antonio after eighty years of being in this city.[13] Both the mural and the university venue have been on the verge of disappearing, but their symbolism and usefulness in this city have favored their continuing to exist, not to mention the wonder and pride produced by knowing that, there, too, Mexico and the university are well represented. VM

Notes

1 Álvaro Matute, *Aproximaciones a la historiografía de la revolución mexicana* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2005), pp. 128-148.
2 Juan O'Gorman, *Juan O'Gorman: 100 años* (Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, 2005), p. 239.
3 See Gobierno de México, "Museo casa estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo," INBA, https://inba.gob.mx/recinto/51. [Editor's Note.]
4 Juan O' Gorman, *Autobiografía* (Mexico City: Pértiga, 2005), p. 117.
5 Edward R. Burian, *Modernity and the Architecture of Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), p. 140.
6 José Ortiz Monasterio, "Los murales de la biblioteca de C. U. se hicieron para evitar que el edificio fuera un monstruo," *Unomásuno*, February 1, 1982, p. 18.
7 José Ortiz Monasterio, "Dijo O'Gorman de sus murales en C. U.: 'Por lo menos que fuera una cosa que no disgustara al público,'" *Unomásuno*, February 2, 1982, p. 18.
8 Juan O' Gorman, *Autobiografía*…op. cit., pp. 196-198.
9 Juan O'Gorman, *Autobiografía, antología, juicios críticos y documentación exhaustiva sobre su obra* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), p. 259.
10 About this, see Dana Alexandra Levin Rojo, "Las siete ciudades de Cíbola," *Arqueología Mexicana*, no. 67, pp. 50-55, https://arqueologiamexicana.mx/mexico-antiguo/las-siete-ciudades-de-cibola. [Editor's Note.]
11 Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *Juan O'Gorman: arquitecto y pintor* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1982), p. 257.
12 Catherine Nixon Cooke, *Juan O'Gorman: A Confluence of Civilizations* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2016), p. 57.
13 Miguel García Audelo and Paula de Gortari, *UNAM San Antonio: Historia*. (San Antonio: UNAM San Antonio, 2024), pp. 232-257.