

# The muralist movement: Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros

Maricela González Cruz Manjarrez\*

Antonio Pulido



Diego Rivera, *Water, Origin of Life*, detail. Polystyrene and cement, 1951.  
Chapultepec Park, Mexico City.

Photos from the book  
*El muralismo de Orozco, Rivera y Siqueiros*,  
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**M**uralism is one of the fundamental artistic movements in the culture of contemporary Mexico.

Because of its aesthetic conceptions, artistic force and political connotations, this movement is a key historical reference point and has become a part of our cultural codes and values.

Nevertheless, the movement is often evaluated on the basis of commonplaces; its images are sometimes applied in ways which distort the movement's meaning or reduce it to cardboard-figure stereotypes.

We are living in a period when relativism, ambiguity, obsolescence and the fragmentary impose themselves on economic, political and cultural life. At the same time everything is run according to the prevalence of saturation, massiveness, uniformity and cosmopolitanism. In this context it is necessary to reevaluate movements such as muralism on the basis of their own development and from our contemporary viewpoint. The objective: understanding, for example, how and why mural art not only succeeded in presenting itself on the walls where it was originally painted, but also moved to museums, was reproduced in schoolbook illustrations and mass-media images; how it has been used as a backdrop for public and government events, in information pamphlets, as images on banners at demonstrations, in cartoons as well as deluxe art-book editions.

Mexican muralism is one and many, subject to different interpretations, depending on the focus, time or "use" it is judged by. This is due to its heterogeneity, its relation to the post-revolutionary Mexican government (its main sponsor), its proximity to political tendencies such as Populism,

Stalinism and Trotskyism as well as anti-fascist and anti-government positions, its internal contradictions, and the expressive wealth—or, sometimes, the reiteration and schematism—of its images.

Despite this diversity, certain characteristics remain constant in this movement. These are the traits that, affinities, rejections, political positions or cultural preferences aside, allow it to be defined as a movement and make possible its evaluation and in some cases even its validity. Some of these characteristics are:

Like other vanguard artistic movements, Muralism shares artistic proposals that promote new perceptions and aesthetic practices. It renews language and seeks to break with the predominant modes of artistic production and circulation. It organized groups for presenting its conceptions (the Union of Workers, Technicians, Painters and Sculptors—SOTPE—was founded in 1922); put out a manifesto (the SOTPE Manifesto, published in late 1923); and used writings, conferences, communications media (*El Machete*, 1924-1925), as well as the creation of public art in association with daily life.

Muralism participated in all of these arenas. Key was the way it used nationalist practices to question Eurocentrism. The need to provide public art and create a Mexican aesthetic in the plastic arts led these artists to take realism as a point of departure in order to recreate, assimilate and reevaluate the customs, features, fiestas, myths, geography and history of communities which constitute the base of national cultures.

Art understood as social practice, knowledge and life flowed together in the poetry of the muralist movement. Its attempt to recuperate the elemental dimensions of daily life and the importance of social groups, so as to form values in accordance

with the search for a national aesthetic, have given this movement a vital, subversive, spontaneous and dynamic potential. This made it into the obligatory reference point mentioned above.

When muralism lost the above-mentioned characteristics, joining and blurring itself into the Mexican School of Painting, this dynamic feeling was transformed. From that point on artistic forms and practices were determined more by a feeling of permanency and sticking to codes or closed structures, rather than searching and experimentation.

At different times and in different ways, Siqueiros, Orozco and Rivera—founders of the muralist movement who were also linked to the Mexican School of Painting—carried out work that traced key lines of demarcation. A basic premise of their work was that art would use images, practice and writing in order to question the historic period in which it was created.

Thus, from their personal style—linked to such 20th-century artistic vanguards as Expressionism, Cubism and Futurism—to the way they sought an integral artistic approach, these men became the most important figures in a period which spanned two decades (1920-1940). Their influence continues to this day.

These three muralists' artistic trajectories did not develop in the same way. Although all three founders of the muralist movement began their artistic training at the old Academia de San Carlos, and their work established the principal lines that would characterize the movement over the course of two decades, they had widely divergent artistic languages and ways of concretely realizing their murals and using painting to express their concerns.

Born in different states—Orozco in Jalisco (1883), Rivera in Guanajuato (1886) and Siqueiros in Chihuahua (1896)—all three came to Mexico City as young boys and it was

\* Member of the Institute for Aesthetic Research, UNAM.



there that they carried out their most important artistic work.

While Rivera did important easel paintings in Europe, especially those of his Cubist period (still not fully appreciated on an international level), Siqueiros painted murals in Latin America. The three later worked in the United States during the 1930s, leaving behind significant murals like those painted by Rivera in Detroit, Orozco in New York and Siqueiros in California. (It was in California that Siqueiros first put into practice a new muralistic concept in terms of the use of materials, placement, the movement

of spectators and dynamic expression in representation.)

Of the three, it is Siqueiros who experimented with and theoretically proposed the use of new materials and artistic forms of perception. Siqueiros, above all, put into practice his desire to maintain harmony between new subjects and artistic objects, within the framework of modernity through group work (in New York, San Miguel Allende and Mexico City), conferences and writings.

He came to produce works where experimentation, monumentality and dynamic feeling (showing a certain

affinity with Futurism) are linked to a political position associating the revolutionary with socialism.

Diego Rivera was probably the muralist with the most solid artistic training and the one who assimilated schools and artistic currents as diverse as those of the Italian Renaissance, the French Cubism of Cézanne and Gauguin and the Spanish Realism of El Greco, among others.

In his re-creation of Mexican culture, he used all types of artistic resources, synthetic forms, curved lines, planar and pyramidal composition and rich coloring.



José Clemente Orozco, *The Carnival of Ideologies or the Political Circus*.  
Fresco, 1937. Government Palace, Guadalajara, Jalisco.





José Clemente Orozco, *Allegory of Nationality*.  
Fresco, 1940. Gabino Ortiz Library, Jiquilpan, Michoacán.

Diego Rivera,  
*The Elements and Technical Man. Mother Earth*.  
Fresco, 1923-27.  
Autonomous University of Chapingo,  
state of Mexico.



Vicente Gufajosa.

David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Social Security for All Mexicans*.  
Pyroxyline and vinyl on celolex, 1952-1954,  
Hospital de La Raza, Mexico City.



Guillermo Vázquez Ramírez.

Pedro Angeles.




Detail and the grouping of figures form a didactic and eclectic narration which maintains a constant and optimistic reference to socialism.

Rivera's synthesis and codification of elements from Mexican reality, together with his expressive capacity, make him one of the most popular muralists.

Social criticism and individual concerns alternate, within a

humanistic framework, in Orozco's murals. This is manifested artistically through symbols, allegories or metaphors and sarcasm, irony and denunciation. The expressionistic force of his style of angular lines, the use of diagonals, wide brushstrokes, tension and restricted tonal range (gray, ochre, red and orange) are masterfully used to question — among other things— false established values, mass movements,

political and religious dogmatism and totalitarianism.

The expressive capacity and coherence of discourse, on the basis of an aesthetic linked to nationalism —elements present in all three of these masters of muralism— give the muralist movement a place of honor in the Mexico's art and within the contemporary artistic movements (such as Constructivism) which seek to integrate art with politics and daily life. 

Maricela González Cruz Manjarrés



David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, detail. Pyroxyline on cement, 1939.  
*Union of Mexican Electrical Workers, Mexico City.*