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*Human Sacrifice*, José Clemente Orozco.

## PRE-HISPANIC ART IN THE MURALIST MOVEMENT

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**T**he vastness of its production and the large number of artists who participated makes it difficult to describe the Mexican muralist movement precisely. Generalities are insufficient for describing its content and style, outlining the scope of its originality or determining whether it had a single underlying ideology. Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco,

though quite different from each other, represent Mexican art's specific outlook.

The muralist movement involved a new way of painting history and became an area for reflection and representation of Mexico's history and principal ethnic and cultural components. As part of this process, the painted walls bore witness to the value of the pre-Columbian world, at the same time that they created a myth about that world, a myth that each of the painters depicted differently. We will seek here to describe and interpret some aspects and problems of

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*Carnival*, Rufino Tamayo.

the pre-Hispanic presence in the muralist movement. This is extremely complicated, especially in light of the critical reappraisal of the Indigenous Nationalism of Mexican archeologist Manuel Gamio,

who spearheaded the effort to uphold the value of the pre-Columbian past. Gamio delved into the situation of the indigenous population of his time. In his well-known text *Forjando patria* (Forging a Homeland), he referred to the small, fragmented homelands the Indian groups built which were prejudicial to the dream that his country would become a great, unified nation. His hopes for the progress and modernization of Mexico were invested in that idea.

An analysis of pre-Columbian elements in muralism is difficult to conceive of without two components: reverence for the past and the existence of survivors from that glorious past and their real current situation. It should be added that Gamio's position is consistent with recognition of non-Western cultures and their values, a subject which was being debated at that time in Europe, and is stimulated by the need to construct a national culture after the 1910 Revolution.

### **First Steps**

Muralism, as a collective movement, actually began in 1922 when José Vasconcelos, then Secretary of Public Education under the administration of General Obregón, commissioned a series of murals for the large patio of the National Preparatory School. The first to begin painting there were Ramón Alva de la Canal, Emilio García Cahero, Jean Charlot, Fernando Leal and Fermín Revueltas. All these painters came from the “open air schools,” a kind of Mexican Barbizon under the direction of Alfredo Ramos Martínez, who had collaborated with Vasconcelos since the beginning of his cultural program. Ramos Martínez's writings expressed ideas similar to those of the Secretary of Public Education, a great promoter of mural painting who considered

getting close to nature the source of a new kind of art. This gave rise to a certain picturesque quality in the murals at the National Preparatory School; yet it was there that change was generated.

Alva de la Canal's mural *The Arrival of the Cross in New Spain* reflects Vasconcelos' ideas about history and

national culture. De la Canal painted a historic religious theme showing the arrival of the Spaniards to New Spain and the dissemination of the Catholic religion. The figures are monumental, solid and Classical, and the Spaniards are peacefully and positively depicted as providers of religion.

In the scene painted by Fermín Reueltas, *Allegory of the Virgin of Guadalupe*, the artist introduces something new: he makes use of popular imagery by employing an iconographic figure, making the Virgin the central element.

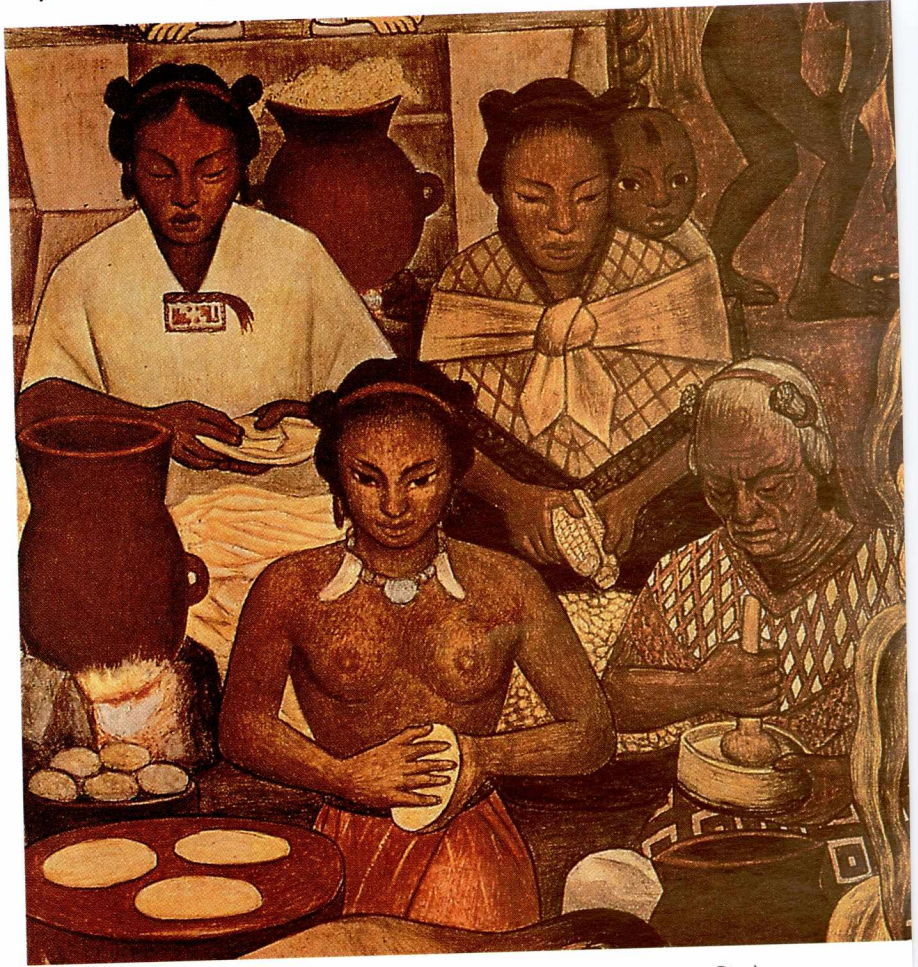
In *The Conquest of Tenochtitlan*, Jean Charlot made the first attempt to counterpose the Indian culture to that of the Spaniards on an equal footing. Charlot's mural shows the massacre of the Aztecs at the Templo Mayor. His sympathy for the pre-Hispanic world grew out of his European training and the acceptance, in Paris, of primitive cultures as basic sources for art.

Until 1922, that which was Indian was not part of the spiritual nationalism of Vasconcelos and his generation. The members of the Athenæum,<sup>1</sup> immersed in European philosophical idealism, could only conceive of art as the expression of European culture and, as such, as belonging to the sphere of Classicism. The real appreciation of pre-Hispanic culture and of the Indian population as bearers of culture came from another source, Mexican anthropology and archeology, together with the determining influence of the European discovery of primitive art.

<sup>1</sup> Mexican association of modernist writers, essayists and philosophers founded in 1907. [Translator's note.]

## The Manifesto

In the 1923 *Manifesto of Workers, Technicians, Painters and Sculptors*, the bases for this movement were put forward with, as can be appreciated in the following excerpt, an exaltation of indigenous culture:



*Huastecan Civilization* (detail), 1950, Diego Rivera. (National Palace, Mexico City.)

We repudiate easel painting and all ultra-intellectual, drawing-room art as aristocratic, and we uphold the manifestations of monumental art because of its public usefulness.

We proclaim that all aesthetic manifestations alien or contrary to the feeling of the people are bourgeois and that they should disappear because they contribute to perverting the tastes of our race, which has already been almost completely perverted in the cities....

Not only everything which is noble work, but everything which is virtue is a gift of our people (in particular of our Indians), but also the smallest manifestation of the physical and spiritual existence of our race as an ethnic force springs from it, as well as its admirable and extraordinarily unique ability to create beauty: the art of the people of Mexico is the greatest and healthiest spiritual manifestation in the world and its indigenous tradition is the finest of all.

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*In Mexico the desire was to return to the painting of walls, as practiced by the artists of the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.*

Ages and the Renaissance. The theoretical bases were not the same as those of the *cinquecento*; the Mexican Renaissance needed to recover all that had been buried by artistic humanism from the fifteenth century through the middle of the eighteenth; for example, a return to the so-called minor arts (handicrafts and folk art) and the nation's own pre-Hispanic past.

### Diego Rivera and the Pre-Columbian World

In November 1921, Diego Rivera, recently returned to Mexico after 14 years in Europe, accompanied Vasconcelos on a trip to the Yucatán and Campeche. Rivera was dazzled by the tropics, by Mayan sculpture and women's clothing. At the end of that year he began work at the National Preparatory School's Bolívar Amphitheater. It was there that he painted a mural —*Creation*— which, far from showing the impact that the daily life of the Indians in southeast Mexico made on him, showed his own identification with the ideas of the Secretary of Public Education.

The theme of *Creation* focuses on the idea of the unity between humanity and the creative principle of the universe through art and religion, in a vision similar to

that put forward by Vasconcelos in his *Monismo estético* (Aesthetic Monism). When *Creation* was unveiled, Antonio Caso spoke of it as the first "Americanist" mural. Molina Enríquez said that Rivera had laid a cornerstone for the future of American art: "This is the art that Vasconcelos with prophetic vision predicted for the Americas."

Pre-Columbian elements appear in Rivera's work starting in 1923, when, at the Secretariat of Public Education, he painted *Xochipilli*, set in a tropical landscape amidst an imaginary jungle, similar in foliage and abstract design to the Arcadia invented by the customs official Rousseau. Rivera presented

this deity—which, in Aztecs aesthetics, seeks to transmit youth and the realization of beauty through its idealized features—as an inexpressive idol. Rivera situates the pagan god in the painting in the manner of

Gauguin, the inventor of Romantic Primitivism, who rather than adopt the formal principles of primitive cultures makes only an anecdotal visual reference to the native gods. The German Expressionists placed African figurines in their paintings in the same way; they were only interested in showing that they were inspired by lifestyles which they believed to be immersed in social harmony, the product of a simple life and a Paradise-like landscape. The *Bath at Tehuantepec*, in the same building, does nothing more than confirm this notion of a paradise of beautiful brown bodies, whose serene rhythm accentuates a timeless existence.

It was only some years later that Rivera would become interested in the lineal and flat values of the codices, the bright colors of the garments, etc. Around 1930, at the Palace of Cortés, Rivera took on the task of painting the history of Cuernavaca from the Conquest in 1521 through Emiliano Zapata's agrarian revolution in 1911. A careful study by the U.S. scholar Stanton Catlin has shown the various iconographic sources of the central panel, which shows the battle between the Aztecs and the Spaniards. Catlin refers to three different sources: a) the pre-Hispanic codices, in particular *La Matrícula de Tributos* (The



Great Tenochtitlan (detail), 1945, Diego Rivera. (National Palace, Mexico.)

Register of Tributes); b) post-Conquest codices, Sahagún, the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (Tlaxcala Canvas) and others; c) in addition, Catlin analyzed pre-Hispanic pieces that Rivera could have seen in the Museum of Anthropology and the ways they might have been incorporated into the mural.

Catlin establishes convincing relationships, which allow us to deduce that Rivera had to study the codices and become a real historiographic painter, in the same way that other painters from the Renaissance onward had to be familiar with the Bible and Greek mythology in order to derive lessons on the human condition. This would make Rivera the inventor of Classical Indigenism. It differentiated him from, and at a certain

point brought him nearer to, neo-Classical painting of the 19th century, which sought to introduce the historical Indian as an exemplary presence. On the other hand, the differences are obvious: different sources, a distinct style and conception of history and support for a public ignored in the previous century.

There is a third moment in Rivera's work which highlights the pre-Hispanic past. After *The Battle of Cuernavaca*, the painter went on to depict all the pre-Columbian peoples, their myths and legends, temples and palaces, culture and conflicts, arts and trades, on the walls of the National Palace.

This work was done in two stages; the first began in 1929 and lasted until 1935. During this period



*The Battle of Cuernavaca* (detail), 1929-1930, Diego Rivera.  
(Palace of Cortés, Cuernavaca, Morelos.)

the stairway triptych was painted, with an overall history including the Conquest, Independence, the Reform and the Porfirio Díaz regime. The historical journey begins with the myth of Quetzalcóatl in his triple role as star, god and cultural hero. Ten years later, in 1945, Rivera painted a representation of the ancient world of Mexico on the second floor of the same building. With his architecturally evocative style, bringing to mind Ignacio Marquina's beautiful maps and the inventories of the first classifiers of species, Rivera sought to depict daily life in ancient Mexico. The formal techniques, stylization and idealization are the same, but the bright colors, the obsession for detail and the skewed proportions give a distorted vision of what was meant to be a portrayal of the grandeur of Mexico.

The harshest contradiction with regard to the pre-Hispanic is, of course, the complete blotting out of a sense of space. The atmosphere in these murals becomes stifling; there are no punctuation marks to make it pos-

sible to differentiate syntax from form. It was in the same vein that he presented the image of the women of Tlatilco in part of the mural at the Insurgentes Theater, or the Tlazoltéotl in the mural at the Hospital de la Raza, which appears not with the impressive ferocity that should characterize it but as a kind of subdued caricature.

The miles and miles of walls painted by the indefatigable Rivera resemble the creation of a natural history in which the artist attempts, as if through the lens of a microscope, to document the entire universe within the space of his canvas. Empirical data became Rivera's obsession, as he tried to present us with the whole history of Mexico in all its rich diversity. Taken together, Rivera's murals put forward the idea of a harmonious social whole, with inequality beginning only in the Porfirio Díaz era. The painter's relation with the pre-Hispanic past appears to lie in the paradigm of what Luis Villoro, in *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo* (The Great Moments of Indigenism), called "the second moment of indigenism," when the pre-Hispanic past was put forward as a distant, positive vision.

Other Facets

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#### *José Clemente Orozco: The Skeptical View*

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the various members of this artistic movement held different viewpoints. For Orozco the pre-Hispanic existed to the degree that it had been transformed by the Conquest. At the Preparatory School, the Indian is a subhuman rescued by the missionary's piety, or Malinche dominated by a stony Cortés, who accentuates his role as conquistador by trampling on the Indian in a gesture of annihilation.

In the Dartmouth College murals, the pre-Hispanic appears as a world ruled by magic, stars and sacrifice; crushed by the Spanish war machine, the Indian suc-

cumbs to modernization and emergent capitalism. Orozco offers the other face of Rivera's idyllic world: the face of war and human sacrifice. It was the Western view that this world was mythic and primitive, rather than civilized, that characterized Orozco's vision of the pre-Columbian past.

*David Alfaro Siqueiros: Futurist Visionary*

Of the so-called Big Three, it was Siqueiros who best understood certain formal values of pre-Hispanic art, specifically Aztec sculpture, such as the use of compact masses, the capacity for synthesis and the feeling of the images in stone. This can be seen clearly in some easel paintings, for example *Proletarian Mother* and *Peasant Mother*, as well as the Preparatory School mural entitled *Burial of the Sacrificial Worker*. But in the end, of these three, it is Siqueiros who was most interested in imagining the future and who drew away from the distant past.


*Rufino Tamayo: The Legacy of Color*

Although he was marginal to the muralist movement, Tamayo was undoubtedly key in relation to pre-Hispanic art. In the 1920s, Tamayo and his generation brought forth a vigorous, large-scale painting, a kind of "dark-skinned post-Cubism." Tamayo's links with the pre-Hispanic begin in the 1940s. Curiously, despite his early contact with pre-Hispanic pieces, he came to understand the principles of pre-Columbian art through his admiration of Picasso's primitivism. From his standpoint as universal Mexican, Tamayo was implacable towards the vision of the Indian that arose from the Mexican muralist school; in his own words, this was the viewpoint of a foreigner (by which he meant Rivera above all). At bottom, Rufino felt that being an Indian gave him greater freedom to interpret the pre-Hispanic legacy. More than a question of form, Tamayo conceived of this cultural inheritance as color and texture on the basis of his observation of folk

art. Thus, he harmonized the past and the appreciation of its formal values with the artistic work of the present.

Today the pre-Hispanic legacy continues to be a theme in Mexican art; painters—like historians—read history and society in their own way.

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*Proletarian Mother*, David Alfaro Siqueiros.