

University City

A Captivating Encounter with Culture

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Insurgentes Avenue, one of Mexico City's main thoroughfares, takes you to University City, a monumental work south of the Pedregal in the San Angel district. On either side of Insurgentes Avenue, the first things the visitor sees are the Mexico '68 Olympic Stadium, the Rector's Tower and the Central Library, all outstanding buildings of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, covered with murals by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Juan O'Gorman.

As a whole, the campus is a landmark in the history of contemporary Mexican art, with its mix of European architectural avant-gardes and the renewed artistic quest of Mexican muralism which had its second great moment when University City was built.

The murals were painted on outside walls so that they were visible from different perspectives. The aesthetic intention behind the construction of the University City campus was not just to put a painting on a wall, but to achieve an aesthetic integration of architecture and painting. This renovating aim was called plastic integration and the most notable example is the Central Library. The mural that covers its four walls, *Historical Representation of Culture*, is a huge mosaic measuring 4,000 square meters by architect and painter Juan O'Gorman. It narrates the

great epic of Mexican culture from pre-Hispanic times until this century.

Mexico is a nation said to live by its myths. Its past is very much part of its present and without a doubt permanently forges its future. Mexican art's creative source is to be found in that magical past that survives in our traditions and day-to-day attitudes. That is why the University murals refer to it as a source of renewed life. This is the case of Francisco Eppens' murals in the Schools of Medicine and Dentistry, *Life, Death and the Four Elements* and *Man Elevating Himself Morally, Culturally and Intellectually*, respectively. In his works, the artist recreated, according to the aesthetic demands of his time, the sense of the ancient, pre-Hispanic world view: death as a condition for the continuity of the life cycle; blood and the land as the sacred foundations for the Mexican mentality; the civilizing protection of Quetzalcóatl, the great god who originated with the Toltecs; and the recognition of the mixture of the races, *mestizaje*, as something which enriched our culture. This last theme did not escape the artistic intuition of Diego Rivera either: his mural in the Olympic Stadium, a relief on the embankment, depicts sports as a cultural identification where racial mixes converge.

Specifically university topics also abound. In the Rector's Tower, David Alfaro Siqueiros presents us with a *New University Emblem*, stylizing the UNAM's traditional coat of arms. On the south wall of the same building,

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Opposite page: Rufino Tamayo, *The University, Embryo of Humanism and Wisdom*.



The Central Library's *Historical Representation of Culture*, by Juan O'Gorman.



Guillermo Cenicerros, *Huitzilopochtli*, University Museum of Contemporary Art.

Sebastián has graced the sculpture area with several pieces evoking nature's eternal game of creation.

Siqueiros represented the social vocation of the university in his work *The People to the University, The University to the People*, a mosaic done in relief.

The great artist born in the state of Guanajuato, José Chávez Morado, uses universal themes in his mosaics *The Conquest of Energy* and *The Return of Quetzalcóatl*. The former, located on the facade of the Alfonso Caso Auditorium, shows the great human quest to master energy, from the conquest of fire to the atomic age. The second mosaic shows Quetzalcóatl as a serpent in the form of a raft carrying the most representative figures of the world's religions.

The vestibule of the Alfonso Caso Auditorium boasts a mural by Chávez Morado which pays tribute to the building of University City itself, *Science and Labor*. Here, the artist shows the transformation of rural laborers into urban workers, paying tribute to the builders of this national center of learning.



José Chávez Morado, *The Conquest of Energy*, Alfonso Caso Auditorium.



Benito Messeguer, *Human Creation and The Economy*, School of Economics.

Further south, near the University Cultural Center, is Carlos Mérida's tile work *Integrated Abstraction*, an example of abstractionism, heavily influenced by pre-Hispanic art, achieving a singular synthesis between the original and the contemporary forms.

Many interiors are also graced with very important murals. One example is Benito Messeguer's *Human Creation and the Economy* in the School of Economics' Narciso Bassols Auditorium, an expressionist work in which a majestic use of color goes hand in hand with the violent vitality of its forms.

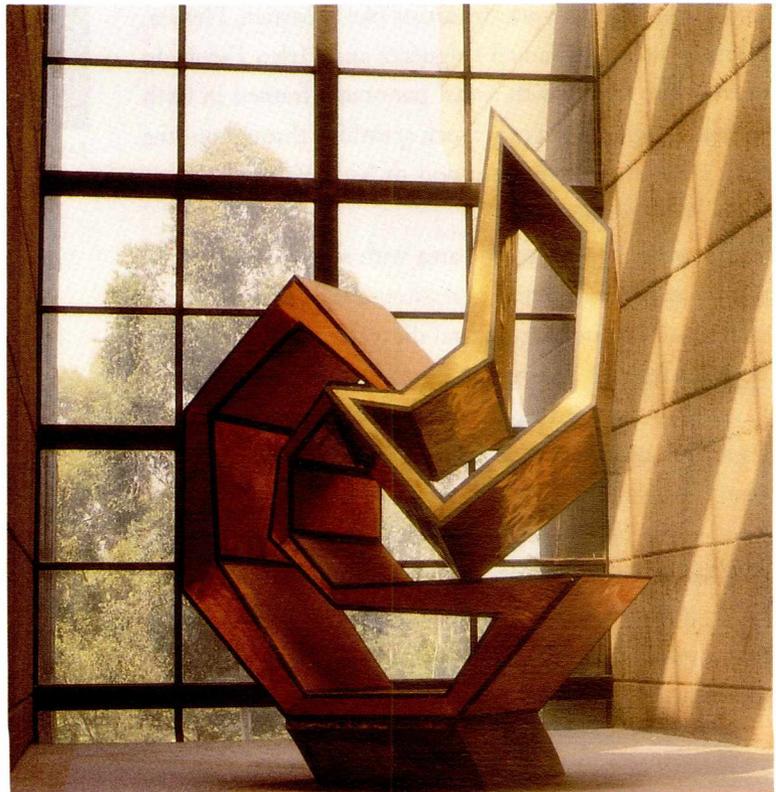
In the vestibule and the interior of the auditorium of the School of Engineering, Federico Silva painted *History of a Mathematical Space*, a creative experience in which geometry answers to a logic wherein science and art seem to converge.

In the University Museum of Contemporary Art, Guillermo Cenicerros contributed several works characterized by a kind of pre-Hispanic expressionism: the conciliation of ancestral forms with the expressive possibilities of contemporary art.

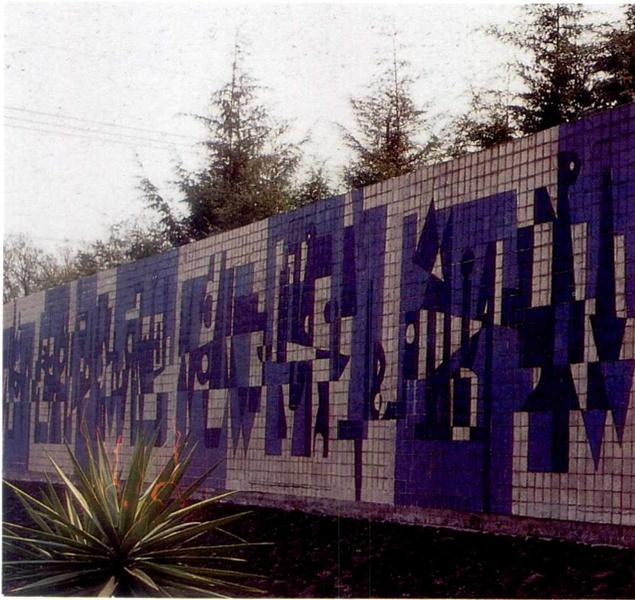
A Gallop in Silence by Lucile Wong, in the vestibule of the auditorium of the post-graduate division of the School of Veterinary Medicine, evokes prehistoric cave art with its dynamic brush strokes suggesting horses that seem to float.

Any visitor who goes through University City will find both in its architecture and its art a thumbnail sketch of Mexican history as well as of our artists' explorations in public, monumental art.

No visitor should miss a stroll through a place where he or she will find works by some of the most prestigious contemporary Mexican sculptors: Sculpture Walk, located



Herusia, *The Unity of the Human Sciences*, National Library.



Carlos Mérida, *Integrated Abstraction*, University Cultural Center.

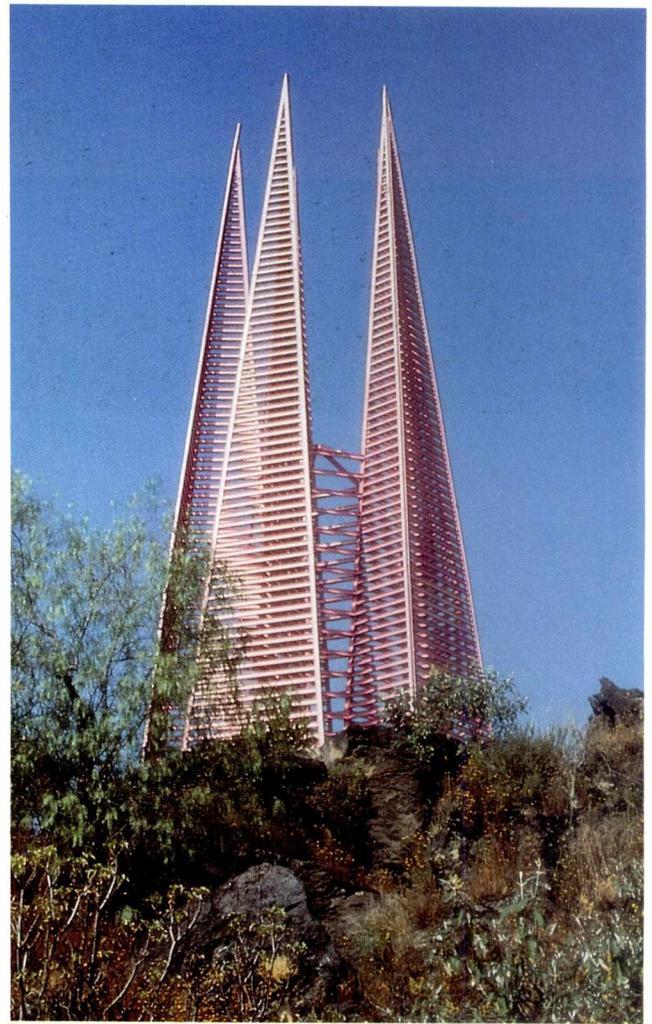
in the Cultural Area, where theater, cinema, art exhibits, music performances and literary events are held.

Here, the harmonious relationship between the sculptures and their natural and urban setting may be appreciated. Monumental works by artists like Sebastián, Hersua, Mathias Goeritz, Manuel Felguérez and Helen Escobedo provide the viewer with a vast panorama framed in both vegetation and the volcanic rock sprinkled throughout the area, a remnant of the eruption of Xitle Volcano in pre-Columbian times.

Sebastián has graced the area with several pieces evoking nature's eternal game of creation: *Tlaloc*, *Calotl*, *Serpent* and *Jaguar's Claw*, a sculptural diptych visible all the way from Insurgentes Avenue.

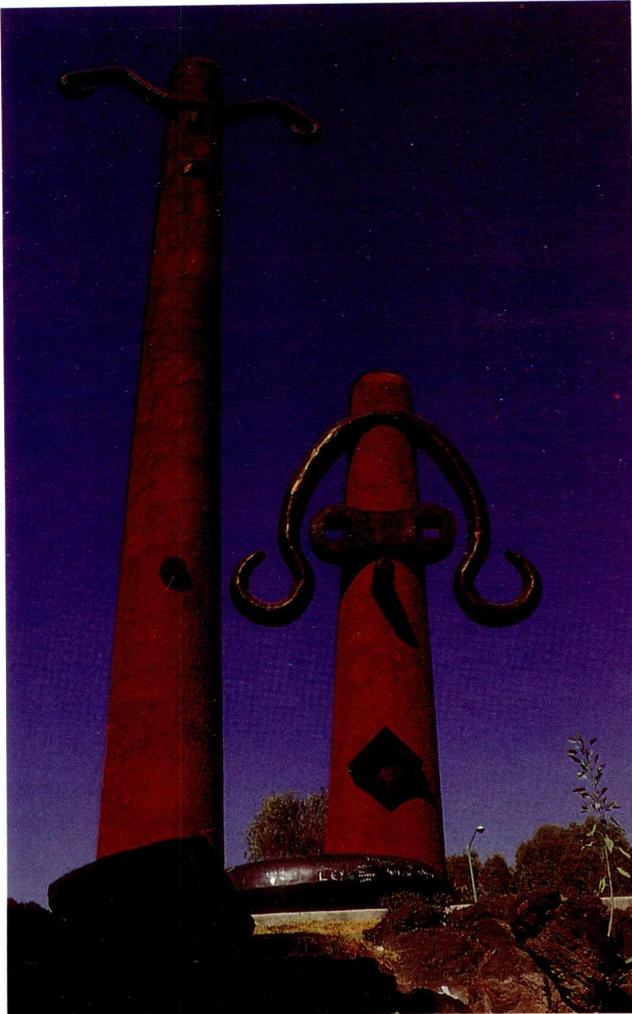
Bird Two, by Hersua, emerges from Sculpture Walk's wild vegetation and consists of several triangles pointing heavenward. Federico Silva's work appears in the same way; one piece, in the Two Serpents Plaza, points to the north; another, alluding to the fiftieth anniversary of UNAM autonomy, stands in the path that joins the national library to the Cultural Area. A third work by Silva should not be ignored: *Eight Rabbit*, with aerial forms pointing south.

The Two Serpents Plaza is so named because that is where two snake heads meet, sculpted in volcanic rock by Federico Silva. This work winds through most of Sculpture



Mathias Goeritz, *The Crown of Pedregal*, University Cultural Center.

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Mathias Goeritz, *The Family*, on the university grounds.

Walk as though it were a legendary piece erected centuries ago. The meeting of the serpents represents the closing of cycles, the point at which different ages meet to give rise to the change represented by a new era.

The Crown of Pedregal, by Mathias Goeritz, is an interesting metal piece comprised of five triangles arranged to form a crown with their corners pointing skyward.

Helen Escobedo left her mark in *Cóatl*, also a work in metal, whose square shapes form a kind of cosmic tunnel. Manuel Felguérez's work *Variation on Kepler's Key* suggests something similar in its allusion to the famous astronomer's discoveries.

On this ramble through Sculpture Walk, we cannot leave out *The University, Embryo of Humanism and Wisdom*, by Rufino Tamayo, a metal structure placed on a square



Helen Escobedo, *Cóatl*, University Cultural Center.

concrete base. The piece is a symbol of the University Cultural Center and is visible from afar.

The Sculptural Center, with its 64 monumental concrete modules, surprises the viewer with its integration of the modern and the historical, the profane and the ritual. It is a reference to Mexico's pre-Columbian past and its different archeological monuments: Palenque, Bonampak, Teotihuacan, El Tajín, etc.

Inaugurated in 1979, it is a large plaza built around a center of volcanic rock. This monumental work's modules form a circle the outside of which measures 120 meters in diameter and the inside, 93 meters. The red clay surrounding the modules enhances its rocky appearance.

This collective sculpture was the work of six of Mexico's most important artists: Mathias Goeritz, Hersua, Sebastián, Helen Escobedo, Manuel Felguérez and Federico Silva.

Anyone who ventures into this area will find a cement path etched with illustrations of the pieces in Sculpture Walk. The volcanic rock at the center of the concrete modules tempts the visitor to play. The middle is clearly marked and, looking around from there, the viewer has the sensation of being at the very hub of the universe. ❧