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## The UNAM Main Library

# Juan O’Gorman’s Visual-Historical Meditation

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### ARCHITECTURE AND VISUAL INTEGRATION

One of the great moments of twentieth century Mexican art is marked by the

construction of University City: the project is based on a desire to achieve a totality, integrating in a single urban site the different manifestations of artistic creation in Mexico at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s.

The university campus reveals an architectural language that, though it came

from other countries, found a singular expression of complete concert between nationalist determination and international architecture.

The urbanist concept of the new university paid particular attention to making it possible to walk through the campus by using a design analogous to the old

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plazas of pre-Hispanic Mexico. This peripatetic predilection allows for an appreciation of the harmony of the whole as the visitor moves through its broad, well-proportioned spaces that uniquely combine functionality and aesthetics.

The story of this ambitious project began at the end of the 1920s when the first modern architectural movement was organized in Mexico and the need to create a university city put forward. The directors of the project, architects Mario Pani and Enrique del Moral, coordinated the work of several architects heading up individual projects and different buildings on the university campus: the Rector's Tower, the Main Library, the departments, schools, institutes, sports fields, hand-ball courts, underpasses, bridges and the Olympic Stadium. These buildings came together to make an impressive whole which has never stopped receiving accolades from abroad since then. Concluded in 1952, the University City is the result of interdisciplinary work of 150 architects and engineers and 10,000 workers under the management of Carlos Lazo.

To this architectural complex was added the work of artists of the stature of Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Chávez Morado, among others, artists who had made the transition from the traditional painting of closed spaces and easel work to that of facades or ex-

teriors with no more reason than to establish a symbiosis between architecture and painting.

Integration of the visual arts opened up new vistas for the creativity of these Mexican painters and gave them the opportunity of experimenting with stone.

It was in this context that Juan O'Gorman created his mosaic for the Main Library, which has become one of the visual and architectural expressions most identified with University City and modern Mexico.

In his work, O'Gorman interprets the development of our national culture as the result of a series of convergences, both

ethnic and historical, the synthesis of which is contemporary Mexico.

Without a doubt, the Main Library as a whole constitutes the aesthetic paradigm under whose auspices University City was built and, as the concept of "visual integration" aspired to making architecture, painting and sculpture a completely reconciled aesthetic totality.

The Main Library, conceived architecturally by O'Gorman together with architects Juan Martínez de Velasco and Gustavo Saavedra, was designed according to the canons of what was called the international style. While it is true that the library responds to a need to assimilate a foreign style in Mexico, and in a way it became a model for the aspirations of modernity underlying the construction of University City, it would be unfair to judge the work as a simple copy or uncritical import of international architecture.

The fact that O'Gorman covered the building with a great mosaic that represented the national culture proves that we are not faced with a pure imitation of architectural functionalism, but a true example of the aesthetic integration of architecture and mural painting with singular nationalist tones. To this we should add a third element: sculpture, present in the volcanic rock foundations as reliefs inspired by pre-Hispanic allusions to the god of fertility and rain, Tláloc.

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The north wall depicts the pre-Hispanic period (detail).

## ICONOGRAPHY

Each of the four walls of the mosaic develops a different theme: the north wall, the pre-Hispanic period; the south wall, the colonial period; the east and west walls, the contemporary period.

It is important to point out a visual constant in the four walls: the symbolic elements on the side panels are clearly separated by a vertical axis that opposes them, distinguishing their spacial organization. These symbols on each side of the central axis are the opposing elements of the thematic duality manifest on all the walls.

## THE NORTH WALL

This part of the mural depicts the pre-Hispanic period and puts into play the life-death duality so important to the Nahuatl cosmogony. Mythical elements predominate on the wall, the obligatory result of the Mexico culture's conception and representation of the origins of Man and life.



On the left of the central axis, separated by two streams, appear the deities and scenes associated with the creative principle of life: in the upper corner, the Sun, and under it, the figure of Tláloc; a little above him, the mythical Quetzalcóatl. In the central section of this part of the mosaic, Tlazoltéotl, goddess of the Earth, dominates, surrounded by the jaguar, symbol of the night and the eagle, a solar image. Beside Tlazoltéotl inside a temple, is Teccistécatl, the masculine deity associated with the Moon and fertility. At the bottom a ritual ceremony is being carried out that shows the sacred nature of war.



The south wall deals with the encounter of the European and pre-Hispanic civilizations.

The right side of the mural represents the counterpart of life: the world of mystery, of the dark, of evil and of death. Here there is also a lunar symbol with a rabbit in the middle; beneath it is Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of water, and before her, the pyre on which her son is being consumed, sacrificed to give life to the Moon. Next to this scene is the depiction of Tezcatlipoca, the creative principle and lord of the wizards.

The dual image of Mictlantecuhtli-Quetzalcóatl dominates the central part of this section between the two streams, in accordance with the iconography of the *Borgia Codex*. In the lower part are images

of warriors in bellicose stances and prisoners of war. This section is completed by the scene of the human sacrifice described above.

The central axis of the composition as a visual solution makes sense not only as the spacial organizer of the elements of the duality on each side of it, but also as an iconographic synthesis in which life and death are reconciled through the follow-

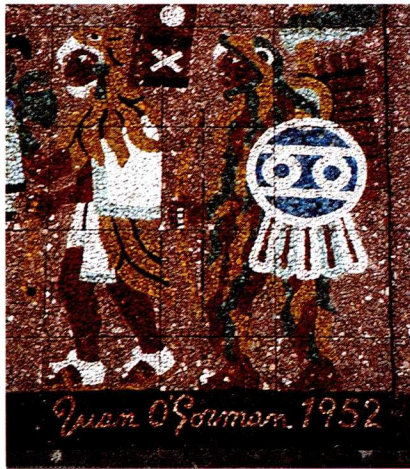


ing motifs: the myth of origins, represented by the Mendocino Codex version of the founding of Tenochtitlan, and over that image, an ellipse divided in two by a chromatic play of black and white that, besides visually balancing the distribution of the lateral elements of the wall, also has value as a synthesis from the iconographic point of view, since its formal composition is based on the cosmogonic belief of the pre-Hispanic cultures that the universe was like two ellipses coming together. A third meaning can also be pointed to: within the ellipse the features of the god Tláloc can be seen through fauces at the center as well as the eyeglasses that, over the ellipse, typify the attributes of the god of rain.

The ellipse also refers us to the idea of a sacrificial flint that joins death with the creation of life. The concept is rounded out with the representation of the Sun as the primeval source of the life cycle whose continuing existence is guaranteed by sacrifices of both men and gods. In this way, O'Gorman resolves the life-death contradictions through a cosmologic synthesis of the pre-Hispanic universe.

#### THE SOUTH WALL

This part of the mosaic deals with the colonial period and the dual character of the Conquest: its religious, spiritual side versus the violent, armed conquest. On either side of the central axis are the lateral panels presided over



Detail from the north wall.

### The integration of different visual arts opened up new vistas for the creativity of Mexican painters.



The east wall shows the tradition/progress duality.

by the Sun on the left and an eclipse of the moon on the right. The artist conceives of the visual balance of the whole through two circular figures on extreme opposite ends of the surface, representing the two sides to the duality.

The left part of the mural depicts the so-called "spiritual conquest," linked to the Christian principle of good. In the middle is a circular figure of Ptolemy's geocentric system. On the periphery are figures and symbols alluding to missionary efforts and the decline of indigenous culture. The visual association of Ptolemy and evangelizing may have been due to the fact that for centuries the Church was reluctant to accept the heliocentric concept of the universe.

Beneath the circle, the figure of Cuauhtémoc, "a falling eagle," symbolizes the defeat of the Mexica civilization; this is further elaborated below in the depiction of the burning of the codices.

The right side of the mural represents the conquest by the sword, here related to the Copernican system of the universe. It also associates Copernicus' astronomical revolution with the Christian principle of evil since scientific knowledge was counterposed to religious beliefs.

Each of the motifs of this section has its counterpart on the left side of the mural. Thus, for example, the medieval fortress contrasts with the church on the opposite side. Other opposites are Copernicus/Ptolemy, the pre-Hispanic demon deity/Archangel Michael, the dictation of the

Laws of the Indies/burning of the codices, Satan/Holy Trinity, armed combat/evangelization, coat of arms/pontifical emblem, sword/cross, etc. On the central axis the opposition of both conceptions of the universe is resolved through superimposing the architecture of different periods: a pyramid contains a tower with battlements (representing the Middle Ages), a temple with an eye on it (a representation of classical and masonic bourgeois cultures), and finally, a church flanked by bloody hands. The axis is completed with a two-headed eagle, representing the shield of the Habsburgs. In this way, to resolve the encounter of the two cultures, O'Gorman symbolically portrays the different cultural contributions that played a role in the forging of Mexican culture.

#### THE EAST WALL

This section repeats the confrontation of the two elements of a duality on either side of the central axis. Here, the tradition/progress duality is shown, with reference to two factors in social progress in Mexico, the city and the countryside.

The duality is once more resolved on the central axis, through superimposing motifs: a pre-Hispanic figure emerges from the fire carrying a hammer and a serpent, symbols of work and civilization; above this a symbol of the atom is visible, source of power and culture; and, finally, the resurrection of Cuauhtémoc, a visual metaphor for the importance of Mexico's past, its histo-

ry becoming relevant when put at the service of the nation. Just as with the other walls, this one counters opposing themes on its lateral sections; in this case, to the left, we have figures of urban Mexico and, to the right, rural Mexico.

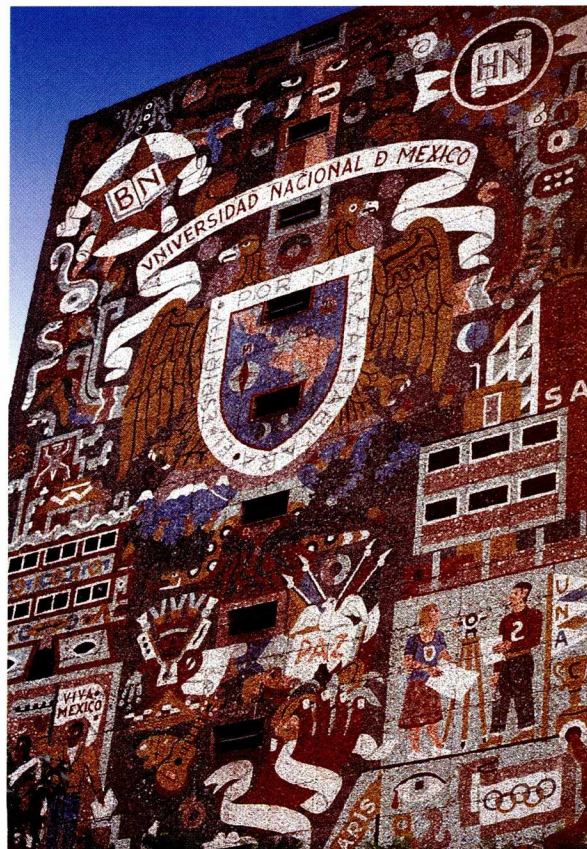
#### THE WEST WALL

In contrast with the other sides of the library, on the west wall, the opposing elements are not completely discernible. This may be because the artist took a dialectical view of the topics on the walls and attempted to create a definitive synthesis of national culture. The image that most closely approximates this aim was activity in the university and, therefore, the rela-

tionship of knowledge to society and production. To depict this, O'Gorman placed student, daily life and sports motifs on the lateral sections of the wall. In the middle, dominating the vertical axis of the composition, the painter originally wanted to place the symbols of Newtonian physics and the physics of relativity as the supreme achievements of human genius, but on request of Carlos Lazo and Carlos Novoa, O'Gorman modified this initial idea in favor of the university emblem.

Lastly, on the roof of the library is a water tank that finishes off the composition. It is covered with pre-Hispanic warriors invested with the attributes of wisdom represented by an open book and serpentine figures. On the pre-Hispanic side, it boasts a Tláloc similar to the one in relief on the fountain or water mirror.

It is worthy of note that in 1992, through the good offices of Dr. José G. Moreno de Alba, the National Autonomous University of Mexico purchased the watercolor sketches of the north and south walls of the Main Library from Sotheby's. They present noticeable and significant iconographic differences vis-à-vis the mural as it actually exists. However, the sketches and the composition of the mural as we know it today are substantially similar. A detailed study of the sketches might well shed light on O'Gorman's original ideas about this, his greatest project, as well as about his interpretation of the history of Mexico. **MM**



The west wall attempts to create a definite synthesis of national culture.