



The Mexican Mural Movement

THE MEXICAN muralists produced the greatest public revolutionary art of this century, and their influence throughout Latin America – most recently in the wall paintings in Nicaragua – has been far-reaching and continuous. There was a time, during the 1930s, when it was also felt in Britain, and in the USA, but since then they have rarely entered artistic discourse.¹

A major difficulty is that of adequately presenting the murals themselves, for although portable murals were produced, they cannot give a sense of the work in its setting. Murals were painted all over Mexico in different kinds of sites: graceful colonial churches and palaces, the patios of ministerial buildings, schools, town halls and museums, in positions ranging from dark and awkward staircases to the prominent façades of modern buildings.

The muralists were the most vigorous and creative of the cultural vanguard of revolutionary Mexico, with a powerful sense of the social value of their art. The violent revolt in 1910 against the regime of Porfirio Díaz had blazed on and off for ten years, during which time the President's chair in Mexico was often vacant. A cataclysmic event, never fully harnessed to any single programme or set of interests – though Zapata's struggle for agrarian reform in Morelos was and remained a fundamental issue – the Revolution brought a new consciousness to Mexico.² The inauguration of the former revolutionary leader Alvaro Obregón as President, in 1920, initiated a period of hope and optimism in which the mural movement was born. 'The Revolution revealed Mexico to us,' Octavio Paz said; 'Or better, it gave us eyes to see it. And it gave eyes to the painters. . . .'³ By contrast with the relatively halting response of novelists, the painters flooded the walls with torrents of images, in a variety of modes: realistic, allegorical, satirical, presenting the many faces of Mexican society, its aspirations and conflicts, history and cultures.

There were several reasons for the dominance of the visual arts and the cultural primacy of muralism. Most immediately, the philosopher and revolutionary José Vasconcelos, whom Obregón made president of the University and Minister of Education, was committed to a mural programme; what was unusual about it, though, compared with others launched under revolutionary conditions, was the absence of any direction concerning style or subject matter. Vasconcelos left his artists free to pick their themes, with unforeseen consequences. His visionary plan was rooted in a social theory indebted both to Pythagorean concepts and to the pos-



7.2 Juan O'Gorman, *Francisco I. Madero* (preliminary study for the mural in the Revolution Room of Chapultepec Castle), n.d., pencil on paper and canvas, one of five panels, 450×110 cm., Collection Vicky and Marcos Micha.

7.1 Diego Rivera, *Man, Controller of the Universe* (detail), 1934, fresco, Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City (INBA).



7.3 Fernando Leal, *The Epic of Bolívar*: 'Bolívar as a Child', 'The Liberator', 'The Death of Bolívar', 1930, watercolour on paper, 52×47.5 cm. each, Collection Fernando Leal Audirac.

itivism of Comte; he held that society evolved through three stages, the most advanced of which was the aesthetic, which revolutionary Mexico should be about to enter. 'If Vasconcelos shared few of the views of the Painters' Syndicate with their collectivist aesthetic, he believed passionately that Mexicans could only be won over once their aesthetic sensibilities had been aroused.'⁴ Out of a conviction that in Mexico it was the visual sense that dominated, rather than the musical, he was the first enabler, releasing the walls of the newly reconstructed National Preparatory School (ENP, *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria*)⁵ to an extremely young and turbulent group of artists, whom he plucked from the art schools and studios, or, in the case of the more mature Rivera and Siqueiros, lured back from Europe.

Secondly, there was a long tradition of mural projects in Mexico.⁶ Dr Atl (Gerardo Murillo), during his brief tenure as director of the School of Fine Arts in 1914, wrote: 'Architects, painters and sculptors should not work with an exhibition or a degree in view, but rather to make or decorate a building'.⁷ And, although most of the painters were less aware of them than of Italian frescoes, the walls of the pre-Conquest cities had been covered with murals.⁸ Rivera first saw examples when he accompanied Vasconcelos to the Yucatán in 1921, at Chichén-Itzá, in the Temple of the Jaguars. For practical purposes, though, any 'tradition' really existed only in theory, and the young painters' claims to be starting from scratch were not just rhetorical. Their training had made no provision for mural painting, and their stories of how they set out to teach themselves often reach levels of high comedy. There was an early battle between the followers of encaustic,⁹ which Rivera used for his first mural *Creation* [Pl. 7.6], and true fresco, with the latter finally triumphant. Much was made in the press and by the artists of the re-discovery of ancient techniques in 1923, during the first phase of the

painting of the Ministry of Education, but it seemed to come down to little more than dipping the brushes in a bucket of water containing nopal cactus leaves. Also perhaps to be taken into account, at least for those artists like Rivera and Siqueiros who had been in Europe, was the fact that several artists formerly of the Cubist milieu were also developing ambitions to paint on a large scale – for instance Delaunay, and, closer in terms of his populist orientation, Fernand Léger.

Thirdly, the Revolution sparked fresh research into the 'Indian problem', beneath which rumbled the great issue of whether Mexico was one nation or two, the results of which placed considerable weight on the role of art. The archaeologist and anthropologist Manuel Gamio 'explained in his *Forjando Patria*, published in 1916, why art is no social interloper in the workings of a country where its uses are as widespread as those of bread'. So Jean Charlot wrote, going on to quote from *Forjando Patria*:

Divergent points of view in aesthetic matters contribute substantially to the pulling apart of Mexico's social classes. The Indian preserves and practices pre-Hispanic art. The middle class preserves and practices a European art qualified by the pre-Hispanic or Indian. The so-called aristocratic class claims its art to be pure European.

Leaving to the latter its dubious purism . . . let us observe both other classes. They are already split by ethnic and economic differences. The workings of time and an economic betterment of the native class will contribute to the ethnical fusion of the population, but cultural fusion will also prove a potent factor. . . . When native and middle class share one criterion where art is concerned, we shall be culturally redeemed, and national art, one of the solid bases of national consciousness, will have become a fact.¹⁰

Such ideas, in bringing the visual arts to the fore, helped to establish the cultural and political framework by which muralism as a national art was established and promoted, but did not necessarily coincide with the muralists' own conception of their role, nor with the social message their art conveyed. In the passage quoted above it is notable that the Indians occupy the position the working class would in a Marxist model, but that model was not fully applicable, because of profound cultural difference between the two major social groupings, and because not all Indians are working class and not all the working class are Indians. Rather than aiming at the cultural fusion outlined above, the muralists demanded, at least in principle, the eradication of bourgeois art (easel painting), and pointed to the native Indian tradition as their model for the socialist ideal of an open, public art: 'a fighting educative art for all'.

In 1922 the 'Declaration of Social, Political and Aesthetic Principles' of the newly formed Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors repudiated centuries of artistic dependence on Europe in favour of a native aesthetic:

The noble work of our race, down to its most insignificant spiritual and physical expressions, is native (and essentially Indian) in origin. With their admirable and extraordinary talent to create beauty, peculiar to themselves, the art of the Mexican people is the most wholesome spiritual expression in the world, and this tradition is our greatest treasure. Great because it belongs exclusively to the people and this is why our fundamental aesthetic goal must be to socialize artistic expression and wipe out bourgeois individualism.¹¹

In practice, though, the differences between a native 'popular' art and the muralists' 'people's art' were not resolved.

The elements of this polemical national art were beginning to take shape on the walls, and they were very different indeed from the first murals commissioned by Vasconcelos. Those were genteel universalist allegories, conceived in 'the gentle aesthetic calm that preceded the impending plastic storm'.¹² Roberto Montenegro, who was currently enjoying considerable success, together with Adolfo Best Maugard and Carlos Mérida, with paintings in the 'soft' picturesque nationalist style then in vogue, and who had also been involved with Dr Atl in the important exhibition of *Folk Art* in 1921, was commissioned to decorate the old convent church of San Pedro y San Pablo. He painted a *Dance of the Hours*, with twelve lightly draped ladies dancing round 'an armoured knight who leans against a Persian tree of life gay with giant blooms and chirping birds, on a gold background'.¹³ The nave of the church was decorated by Xavier Guerrero (whose generous good sense and technical expertise was to be of great help to the new artists) with garlands of flowers. In a rather more dynamic, flamboyant spirit, Dr Atl worked in the patio on 'flaming depictions of Mexican scenery – tropical nights with a million coloured stars, blue surf under orange billowed clouds pounding against red rock', using his impermanent home-made 'Atl-colours'.

Diego Rivera disliked Dr Atl's work as much as he scorned the flat decorative arabesques of Montenegro; none the less, his first mural, *Creation*, which he started at the very end of 1921 in the auditorium of the ENP, was still in line with Vasconcelos' taste for vague allegories. Rivera's grand scheme brought together figures representing Mexican types dressed in picturesque costume [Pl. 7.6], and others representing the arts, and civic and theological virtues (justice, hope, faith, etc.), the whole topped by a symbol of 'The LIGHT ONE OF PRIMAL ENERGY'.¹⁴ What concentrated critical attention on this mural by the already famous artist, recently returned from a successful career as a cubist painter in Paris, was its vigorous mix of cubist volumes and simplifications, and borrowings from quattrocento and Renaissance Italy, especially Giotto and Michelangelo.

Siqueiros, always a skilled and articulate polemicist, had already launched from Barcelona a blast against the flat archaic style of pic-



7.4 and 5 Diego Rivera, two sketches from the Tehuantepec Sketchbook, 1922, pencil on paper, 22.2×16.5 cm. each, Galería Arví, Mexico.



turesque nationalist art. Always the most committed of the muralists to the modern world, both in terms of theme and technical practice, Siqueiros' 'A New Direction for a new generation of American painters and sculptors' called for a new, dynamic and constructive art: 'We must live our marvellous dynamic age!' His language is rooted in the modernist aesthetic of Cubism and Futurism, in which the Cubists' revaluation of 'primitive' art helped to confirm the new attitude to Mexico's native culture: 'We must absorb . . . the constructive vigour of their work, in which there is evident knowledge of the elements of nature', while avoiding 'the lamentable archaeological reconstructions (Indianism, primitivism, Americanism) which are so fashionable today and which are leading us into ephemeral stylizations.'¹⁵ Siqueiros emphasized 'the great primary masses: the cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders, pyramids which should be the scaffold of all plastic architecture. Let us impose the constructive spirit upon the purely decorative. . . . the fundamental basis of a work of art is the magnificent geometrical structure of form . . .' – ideas which probably contributed to some of the most brilliant and uncompromising murals to come, such as Orozco's *The Old Order* (1926), Montenegro's *The Feast of the Cross* (1924) and Rivera's *Sugar Factory* (1923), where the 'geometric structure of form' slipped its cubist anchor and entered a magnificent synthesis with the real architecture.

7.6 Diego Rivera, *Creation*, 1922–3, encaustic and gold leaf, Anfiteatro Bolívar, National Preparatory School, Mexico City.

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The mural movement was increasingly concentrated in the hands of 'Los Tres Grandes': Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. But in the early, heroic years between 1922 and 1924, the young artists commissioned by Vasconcelos to help decorate the walls of the ENP – Fernando Leal, Ramón Alva de la Canal, Fermín Revueltas, Jean Charlot, Emilio García Cahero – made important steps towards its consolidation. It was Revueltas, according to Charlot, who first used the 'hieratic white-clad Indian', which Rivera was to make so familiar, in his *Devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe*. Leal broached a new, darker form of Indianism in his *Feast at Chalma* [Pl. 7.7], which took as its theme a recent incident in a Puebla village: '... During the course of a religious dance round the statue of the Virgin, the concussion caused the image to fall down in its glass case, leaving exposed a small figure carved in stone of the goddess of water, which had been hidden since time immemorial under the rich mantle of Our Lady.'¹⁶

Leal and Charlot had chosen to paint their murals on walls opposite one another, at the top of the main ENP staircase; although dark and awkward, there was the advantage that the 'diagonal thrust' of the wall was a complete contrast to the rectangular easel picture. Charlot, who had been assisting Rivera on *Creation*, began his own wall in April/May 1922 – in fresco as opposed to Leal's encaustic – on the subject of the *Massacre at the Templo Mayor*. A remarkable blend of Uccello and Léger, it was the first mural to treat the Conquest, and depicts robotic and faceless armoured Spaniards driving blood-red lances into defenceless Indian priests and people celebrating in their temple in Tenochtitlán.

7.7 Fernando Leal, *The Dancers of Chalma*, 1921, study for mural in the Ministry of Education, watercolour on paper, 52×91 cm., Collection Fernando Leal Audirac.





7.8 José Clemente Orozco, *Christ Destroying his Cross*, 1943, oil on canvas, 93×130 cm., Museo de Arte Alvar y Carmen T. de Carrillo Gil (INBA). A later version of the destroyed mural of 1924.

Another artist who should be mentioned in this context as 'the first artist who deserves to be called a painter for the people', is Francisco Goitia.¹⁷ Like Siqueiros, Dr Atl and Orozco, he had been actively involved in the Revolution, with Pancho Villa's army, producing on the spot 'vivid, realistic paintings and drawings of the civil war'. Although he evaded the long arm of Vasconcelos, and failed to complete even the modest frescoes he had planned, his studies of the aftermath of battle, and of the poor, especially Indian women, mourning their dead, were undoubtedly a powerful support to the new painting [Pl. 9.11].

The culmination of this first phase of muralism were the fresco cycles by Orozco in the main courtyard of the ENP, and by Rivera on the ground floor of the Ministry of Education. Orozco was bitterly opposed to Rivera in terms of their attitudes to a nationalist art, Indianism, interpretations of Mexican history and the Revolution itself, and his murals, avoiding the clear-cut political and historical message of Rivera, can appear ambiguous. The earliest frescos, however, on the ground floor of the ENP, were, like *Creation*, universalist and allegorical. Of these, the relatively innocuous *Maternity* was the only one to survive; the more shocking *Christ Destroying his Cross* [Pl. 7.8] was among those so badly defaced by the hostile Preparatoria students that Orozco repainted them in 1926. Not at all ambiguous are the powerful and grotesque satires on the middle floor: *The Reactionary Forces*, *Political Junkheap*, *Liberty* and the *False Leaders*, etc., where Orozco's early career as a cartoonist is most evident. On the top floor a much quieter sequence, including *The Mother's Farewell*, *The Grave-digger*, and *Return to the Battlefield*, treats the hidden effect on families of the years of violence.

Rivera's murals for Vasconcelos' recently restored Ministry of Education were commenced in March 1923 amid considerable pub-

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7.9 Courtyard of the Ministry of Education, Mexico City.



7.10 First floor of the Ministry of Education, with murals by Rivera.

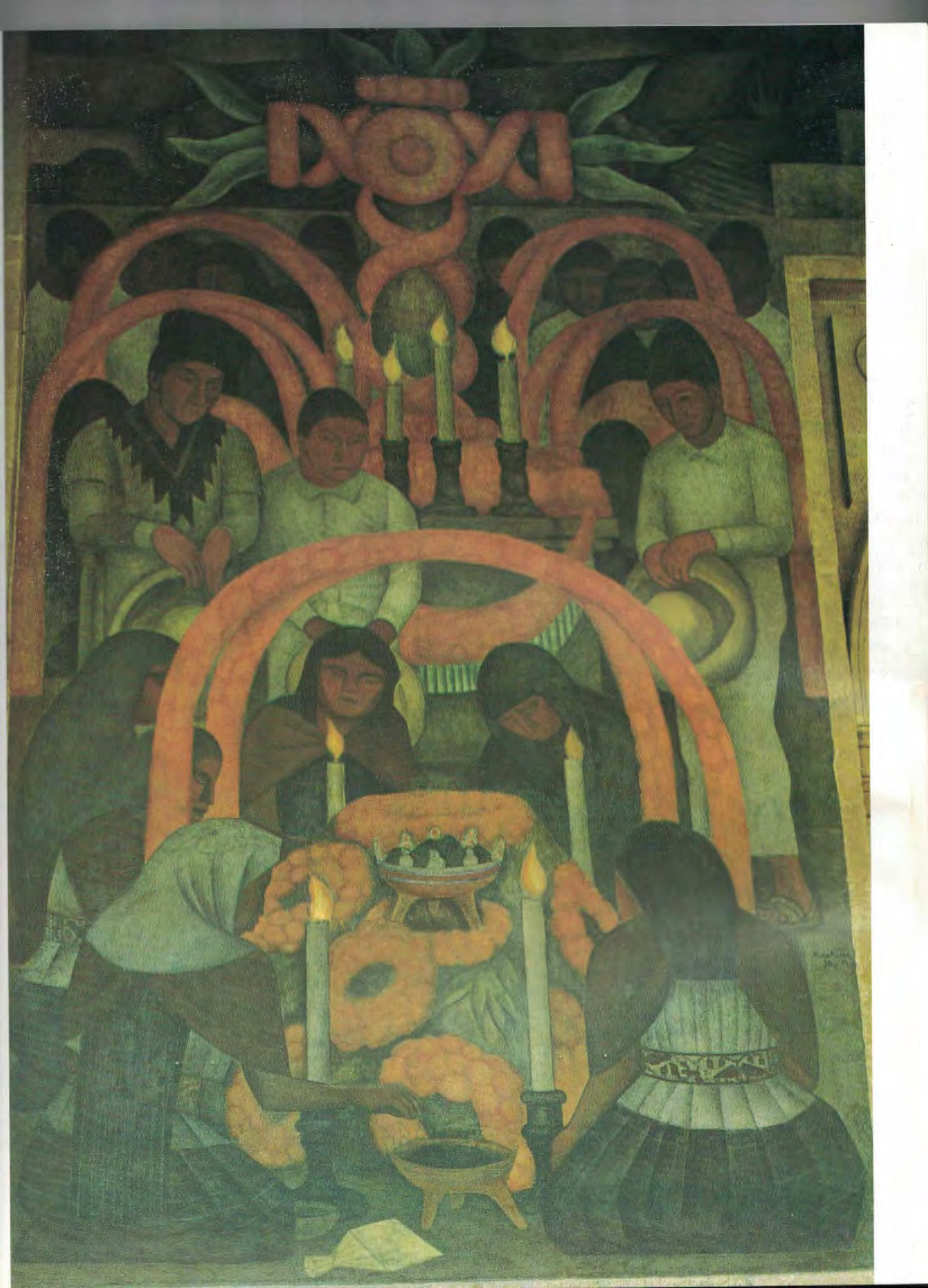
licity; Vasconcelos' pleased anticipation of a decoration of 'women in picturesque costumes typical of each of the States of the Republic' was not, however, to be realized [Pls. 7.4,5]. Rivera did complete the planned Mexican landscape up one staircase, which started at sea level with tropical vegetation, continued to the high plateau and culminated in the volcanoes.¹⁸ But in the first courtyard, rather than the symbolic and decorative figures planned, he began to paint the daily life of the Mexican worker, from the Indian weaver, potter and farmer to the foundry, sugar refinery and mine, and, over the doors, Náhuatl poems and symbols of the Revolution. Three panels devoted to the theme of the redistribution of the land are set into the Court of the Fiestas, and these include the private rites and the street festivals of the Day of the Dead, and surviving pre-Columbian rituals (*Deer Dance* and *Corn Harvest*).¹⁹ Set under the shadow of the arcade, the paintings vary from dark colours to a golden light that glows like corn [Pls 7.11,12].

As Rivera progressed round the courtyards, the work of the other painters commissioned to do panels was covered over – only two by Charlot (*Washerwoman* and *Loadbearers* [Cargadores]) and two by de la Cueva (*The Little Bull* and *Battle Dance* [Los Santiagos]) remain. In these two courts we already find a contrast between Rivera's delight in the modern industrial world, which was to find



7.11 a and b Diego Rivera, *Day of the Dead – City Fiesta*, 1923–4, fresco, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

7.12 Diego Rivera, *Day of the Dead – The Offering*, 1923–4, fresco, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.





7.13 Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry* (south wall), 1932-3, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Edsel B. Ford Fund and Gift of Edsel B. Ford.

its most spectacular literal expression in the *Detroit Industry* frescos of 1932-3 [Pl. 7.13], and powerful social criticism of the exploitation of the workers. Characteristic too is the contrast between industrial and rural Mexico; the latter, Rivera celebrates as vital and picturesque rather than backward and poverty-stricken. (A more Gamio-like presentation of the contrasts between a backward superstitious rural Mexico, and a modern industrial Mexico, in which natural resources are fully exploited, appear in a fresco by Juan O’Gorman entitled *Credit Transforms Mexico* [Pl. 7.15], painted for what is now the Banco Internacional in Mexico City in the 1960s.) The manner in which Rivera moves from the representation of daily life in a simplified realism, to allegory and symbol, is partly possible because of the panel arrangement; later, he was to absorb these last elements into complex formal patterns of great precision, as in *Man at the Crossroads*.²⁰

following page
7.16 Diego Rivera, *In the Trenches*, 1928, fresco, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

7.17 Diego Rivera, *Orgy – Night of the Rich*, 1926, fresco, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

As Obregón neared the end of his four-year Presidential term, political troubles began to resurface. Hostility to the murals, particularly among the relatively conservative students of the ENP, led to ‘direct action’, and the regular casual defacements the painters had contended with became more serious damage, especially to Orozco’s work. In 1924 Vasconcelos resigned, and, his protection



7.14 Juan O'Gorman, *Mexico City*, 1942, tempera on masonite, 66×122 cm., Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City (INBA).

7.15 a and b Juan O'Gorman, *Credit Transforms Mexico*, 1965, fresco, 2400×300 cm., Banco Internacional, Mexico City.



multitud yaca masa obrera y campesina







7, 18, 19 and 20) Diego Rivera, *May Day Marches*, 1928, three watercolours, 21.3x16cm, each, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller.

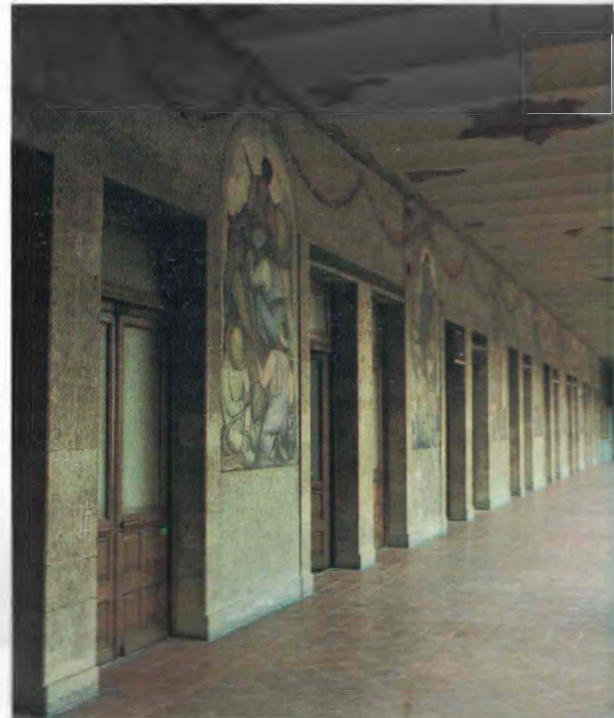
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removed, the commissions were withdrawn, and the early phase of muralism was over. Most of the painters withdrew or dispersed, some to Guadalajara, where Siqueiros went to assist Amado de la Cueva on a commission from the governor, Zuno. Guadalajara was to continue its patronage to the muralists, and was the site of major later works by Orozco – in the University, the Palacio de Gobierno and the Hospicio Cabañas – including the great panel of the Independence hero, *Hidalgo* [Pl. 1.29].

Rivera, however, in the middle of the Ministry of Education murals, won over the new Minister, and for a while virtually had the field to himself in Mexico City. In 1926–7 he painted the chapel and part of the administration building at the National Agricultural School in Chapingo. The huge allegory of creative earth (*The Liberated Earth with Natural Forces Controlled by Man*) on the altar wall of the chapel is flanked with scenes relating to the Revolution, including the haunting image of the buried bodies of Zapata and Montañó: *Blood of the Revolutionary Martyrs Fertilizing the Earth*, as though in triumphant contradiction of the reactionary vow during the Revolution to ‘exterminate the Zapatista seed so that it will not germinate again’.²¹ In 1927 Rivera completed the murals on the top floor of the Ministry of Education; recently returned from Moscow [Pls 7.18,19,20], he introduced Russian revolutionary iconography: the red star, hammer and sickle, and in image after image stressed the revolutionary unity of worker, soldier and peasant, and classic oppositions between rich and poor [Pl. 7.21]. The whole cycle, though, was linked by a long red banner carrying the words of a *corrido*, or song of the agrarian revolution, of the kind Guerrero had used in his woodcut for the cover of *El Machete* in 1924 [Pl. 7.22]: ‘The Earth belongs to those who work it.’

It is perhaps not surprising that these images of Mexico, which combine social criticism with a faith in progress, simultaneously with a celebration of Indian Mexico, should have found favour with succeeding governments. It could be argued that these murals keep the promises of the Revolution unavoidable and permanently in the people’s consciousness, however slow and difficult the action may be to implement them. Octavio Paz analysed the situation with brutal clarity: ‘These works that call themselves revolutionary, and that in the cases of Rivera and Siqueiros expound a simple and Manichean Marxism, were commissioned, sponsored and paid for by a government that was never Marxist and ceased being revolutionary . . . this painting helped to give it a progressive and revolutionary face.’²²

Orozco’s work, however, is less easily assimilable. Forced to stop working on the National Preparatory School in 1924, he returned in 1926 to add a new set of frescos on the ground floor: *The Rich Banquet While the Workers Quarrel*, *The Revolutionary Trinity*, *The Strike*, *The Trench* and *The Old Order*. The first two depict a directionless and strife-torn society, the poor unable to unite against their oppressors. In *The Revolutionary Trinity* [Pls 7.23,25], one of the causes for this is suggested: the two kneeling victims



7.21 Second floor of the Ministry of Education, with murals by Rivera.

7.22 Xavier Guerrero, ‘The Parcelling of the Land’, from *El Machete*, 1924, woodcut.





7.25 (above) José Clemente Orozco, *The Revolutionary Trinity*, 1923-4, first version of the mural, destroyed.

7.25 (top left) José Clemente Orozco, *The Revolutionary Trinity*, 1926-7, fresco, National Preparatory School, Mexico City.

7.24 (top right) José Clemente Orozco, *The Trench*, 1926-7, fresco, National Preparatory School, Mexico City.

7.26 (right) José Clemente Orozco, *The Trench*, 1923-4, pencil on paper, 55x46 cm., Instituto Cultural Cabañas, Guadalajara (INBA).

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7.27 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Zapata*, 1966, pyroxylin on masonite, 122×91 cm., Museo de Arte Alvar y Carmen T. de Carrillo Gil, Mexico City (INBA).

(their original identities as engineer and worker altered into a generalized reference to farmer and worker) are forced apart by a revolutionary soldier blinded by his ill-fitting red liberty hat. It has been suggested that 'the soldier embodies the pseudo-revolutionary state powers',²³ and certainly later murals, like *Hidalgo*, are also critiques of the failures and betrayals of the Revolution. The reference to Christian iconography in *The Revolutionary Trinity* is counterposed in *The Rich Banquet* . . . by reference to the iconography of class. Christian iconography is evoked in a visually more explicit way in *The Trench*, where the central soldier lies spread-eagled as though on a cross [Pls 7.24,26]. Rivera used a similar Christian metaphor to portray suffering in *The Exit from the Mine*; neither artist uses it in the interests of Christian devotion. Both were fiercely anti-clerical. It is difficult for us in secular Europe to understand such apparent contradictions, which have to be perceived in the context of a country where the Church is seen officially as an enemy, but where at the same time the great mass of the people are



7.28 José Clemente Orozco, *The Franciscan*, 1930, lithograph, 31.3×26.4 cm., The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Inter-American Fund.



7.29 José Clemente Orozco, *Prometheus*, 1930, tempera on masonite, 61.2×81 cm., Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City (INBA). A version of the mural painted the same year for Pomona College, California.

7.30 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Ethnography*, 1939, enamel on composition board, 122.2×81.2 cm., The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund.

devout Catholics. The Zapatistas, for instance, rode to battle under the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe [Pl. 7.27].

Orozco was opposed to what he saw as the confusion between painting and folk art in the nationalism of his fellow painters. 'Painting in its higher form and painting as a minor folk art differ essentially in this: the former has invariable universal traditions from which no one can separate himself . . . the latter has purely local traditions.' He abjured 'the painting of Indian sandals and dirty cotton pants, and naturally I wish with all my heart that those who use them will discard them and become civilized'.²⁴ He rejected the idea of painting as propaganda: 'A painting should not be a commentary but the thing itself; not a reflection but light itself; not an interpretation but a thing to be interpreted.' Later, in an open letter of 1944, Siqueiros warned him that his 'ideological expression [would] lose its clarity'.²⁵ But Orozco refused to commit himself to





7.31 José Clemente Orozco, *Hispanoamerica*, 1932-4, fresco, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, U.S.A.



7.32 José Clemente Orozco, *Angloamerica*, 1932-4, fresco, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, U.S.A.

an ideology. His painting sets up an internal dialectic between the power and the dangers of the traditional icons and political myths of the Revolution, in which he too once had 'exuberant faith'.

An interesting comparison can be made between the treatment of history in Orozco's Dartmouth College murals and that in Rivera's huge mural frieze in the National Palace in Mexico City. In the Baker Library at Dartmouth, Orozco painted the evolution of civilization in America, and its modern industrial condition. At the time, he said, 'The American continental races are now becoming aware of their own personality as it emerges from two cultural currents, the indigenous and the European [Pls 7.31,32]. The great American myth of Quetzalcoatl [Pls 7.33,34] is a living one, embracing both elements and pointing clearly by its prophetic nature, to the responsibility shared equally by the two Americas of creating an authentic American civilization.'²⁶ Both painters treat the history of America as a progression, but Orozco then turns the modern era back, satirically, as a grotesque mirror image of the past: at Dartmouth, his *Modern Human Sacrifice* and *Modern Migration of the Spirit* are faced at the far end by *Ancient Human Sacrifice* and *Ancient Migration*. Eisenstein, calling on Orozco to 'replace the beard of the mythical Quetzalcoatl with that of the combative



7.33 José Clemente Orozco, *Head of Quetzalcoatl*, c. 1932-4, crayon on tracing paper, 81.7×61 cm., The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of Clemente Orozco.



7.34 José Clemente Orozco, *The Expulsion of Quetzalcoatl* (detail), 1932-4, fresco, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, U.S.A.



7.35 Diego Rivera, *The History of Mexico: From the Conquest to the Future*, 1929-30, frescos, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City (INBA).



7.36 *Codex Vindobonensis*, Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

7.37 Diego Rivera, *The Huastec Civilization*, 1950, fresco, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City (INBA).

Marx', felt apprehension about the surroundings. 'The bookish spirit of sleeping consciences passes without questioning among this poetry of nightmares and horrors, caught in the frames of the bookshelves.'

The broad strokes and expressionist energy of Orozco contrast strongly with Rivera's smoothly painted, crammed and intricate narrative surface. The National Palace *History of Mexico* [Pl. 7.35] winds from the eagle-cactus symbol of Tenochtitlán in the lower centre, through scenes of the Conquest, episodes of the colonial period, the wars of Independence and foreign invasions of the nineteenth century, to the final mural on the left-hand wall, completed in 1935, which depicts 'Exploited Mexican People, Roots of Social Evil, Repression of Strikers, Armed Uprising in downtown Mexico City', and culminates in the figure of Karl Marx, framed by a 'scientific' sun, pointing to a future where the abolition of class and private property ensures peace, progress and prosperity for all.

Rivera derived the organizational structure for this giant panorama from the snake-like narrative boustrophedon form of the pre-Conquest screenfold, the picture-writing in which the Toltec, Mixtec and Aztec recorded their history and ritual. He was the only one of 'los tres grandes' to continue to seek a solution to the issue of 'art for the people' in truly indigenist terms, not just in reproducing





7.38 Diego Rivera, *The History of Medicine in Mexico: The People's Demand for Better Health* (detail), 1953, fresco, Hospital de la Raza, Mexico City.

images of the pre-Columbian past, which he first did with the painting of the statue of Xochipilli among the plants on the Ministry of Education staircase, and continued in the idealized scenes of the pre-Conquest civilizations in the National Palace corridors (1942-51), but in attempting to understand and use in a creative way the pre-Columbian structures and iconography. His illustrations to the Maya book the *Popol Vuh* [Pls 9.16,17], and the Hospital de la Raza mural *The History of Medicine in Mexico: The People's Demand for Better Health* (1953) [Pl. 7.38], reveal his deep interest in the scientific and ritual thought of the Indian civilizations, and his increasing use of a dualistic structure (the sun and moon governing the two sections in the *History of Medicine*) probably derives from the same source.

Of all the muralists, Siqueiros is by far the most difficult to produce with any success. This is a consequence of his style, technique, and chosen working spaces. These he selected, or altered, had built, to enable him to activate the entire wall area to create a total painting environment. For instance his large mural for the Hospital de la Raza occupies without break the curved walls and the oval ceiling. He used industrial paints and a spray gun, and experimented with photography, using for example a projector to distor-



7.39 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Don Porfirio and his Courtesans*, 1957, fresco, Museo Nacional de Historia, Mexico City (INAH).

7.40 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Revolutionary on a Horse*, 1957, fresco, Museo Nacional de Historia, Mexico City (INAH).





7.41 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *The People in Arms*, 1957, fresco, Museo Nacional de Historia, Mexico City (INAH).

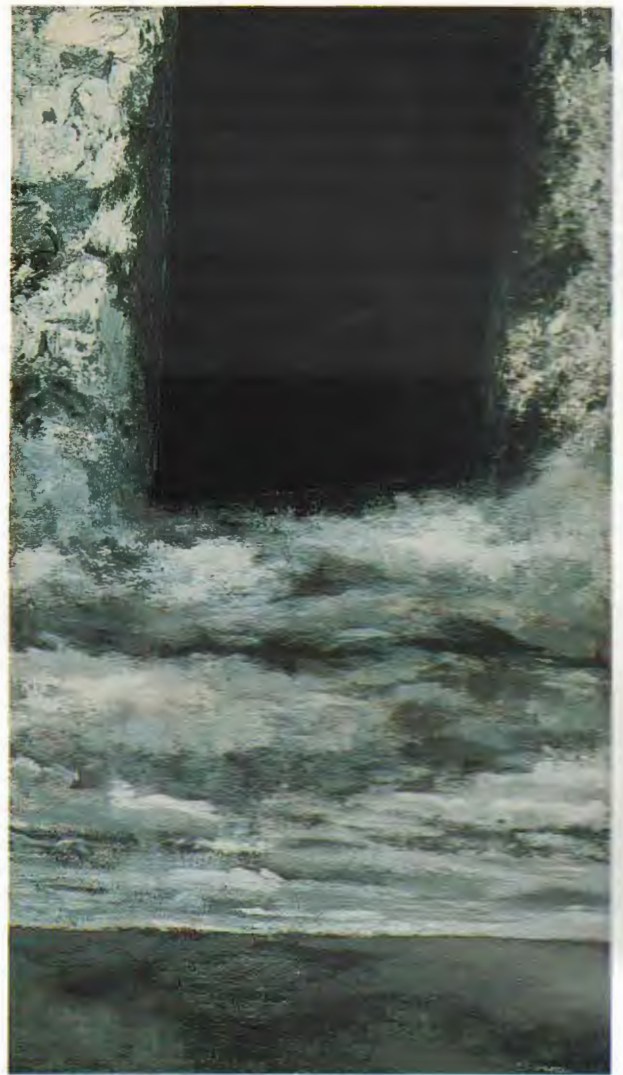
images on the wall, as he explained in his important text *How to Paint a Mural*.

Unlike Orozco and Rivera, Siqueiros relatively rarely utilized themes from Mexican history, being more absorbed in the class struggle of contemporary Mexico. The 'poster-mural' *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* (originally called 'Portrait of Fascism') was the 'first to utilize contemporary photographs to depict a political theme, here the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath'. This mural has a complex relationship with the radical administration of Lázaro Cárdenas and with Siqueiros' own experiences fighting for the Republican government in the Spanish Civil War.²⁷ The first time he addressed the Revolution directly in a mural was at Chapultepec Castle, in a room with specially constructed walls with jutting, curved wings. *The Revolution Against the Dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz* is a triumphant meld of wit and satire in its portrayal of the decadent court of Díaz, and a moving depiction of key moments of revolt leading to the Revolution, 'full of actual portraits taken from photographs of revolutionary heroes . . .'.²⁸ Placed as it is in a site of popular recreation, it is, in principle, in daily, didactic use [Pls 7.39,40,41].

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Siqueiros also developed a theme based on the Spanish invasion of Mexico, 'Cuauhtémoc against the myth', in which the last Aztec emperor, who had sought, unlike his uncle Moctezuma, to defend his people against the Spanish, refusing to succumb to fatalistic myths which identified Cortés with the returning god Quetzalcoatl, becomes the symbol of resistance against colonial/capitalist exploitation.

Public and historical emphasis has always, understandably, been on the murals themselves, but all the artists also painted easel pictures which frequently repeat themes and subjects of the murals.

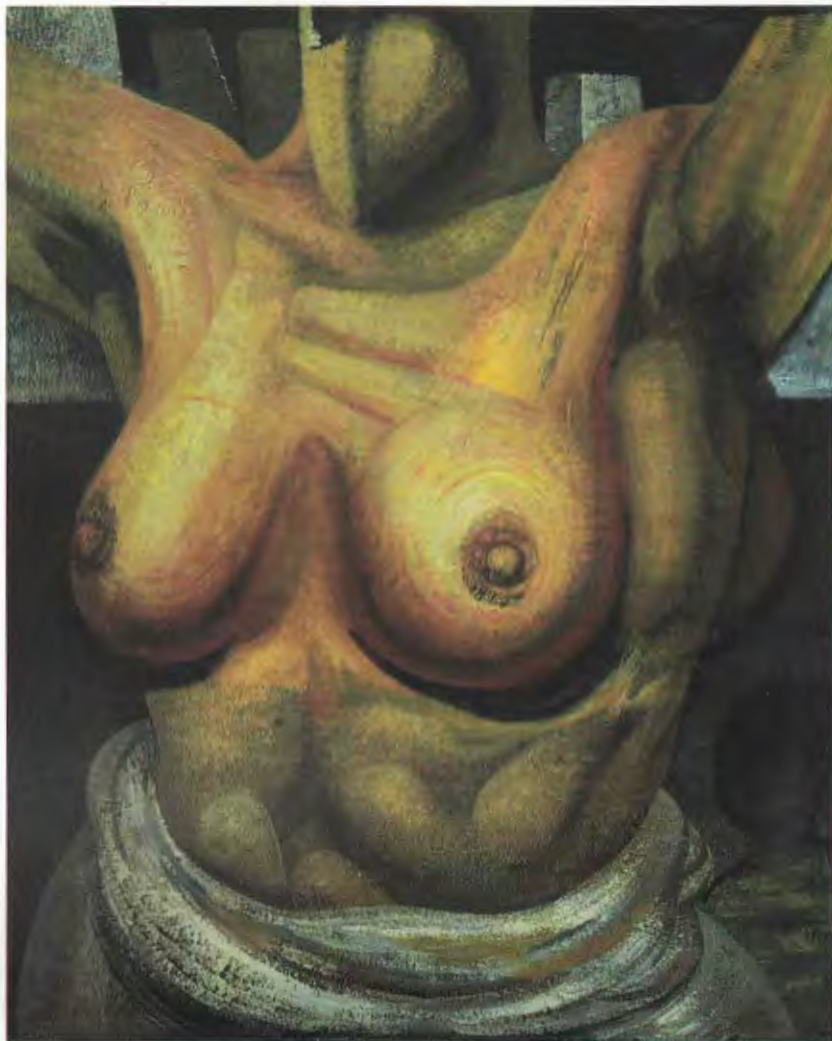


7.43 José Clemente Orozco, *Metaphysical Landscape*, 1948, pyroxylin on masonite, 215×122 cm., Instituto Cultural Cabanas, Guadalajara (INBA).

7.42 José Clemente Orozco, *Cabbages*, 1944, oil on canvas, 100×120 cm., Museo de Arte Alvar y Carmen T. de Carrillo Gil, Mexico City (INBA).

7.44 José Clemente Orozco, *Resurrection of Lazarus*, 1943, mixed media on canvas, 52×74 cm., Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City (INBA).

7.45 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Feminine Torso*, n.d.
pyroxylin on masonite, 114×93 cm., Museo de Arte Alvar
y Carmen T. de Carrillo Gil, Mexico City (INBA). Study for
the torso of the central figure in *The New Democracy*,
1944-5, Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes.



7.46 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Three Calabashes*, 1946,
pyroxylin on masonite, Museo de Arte Alvar y Carmen
T. de Carrillo Gil, Mexico City (INBA).





The vicissitudes of patronage often made it necessary for them to accept private commissions for murals, and for portraits. Orozco's easel paintings also allow him to portray single scenes which he would have felt inappropriate for mural art, or abstract metaphysical images like *Metaphysical Landscape* of 1948 [Pl. 7.43]. On the smaller scale of the easel painting, too, Siqueiros produced concentrated dynamic images which do not fall into the trap which his murals occasionally do of pictorial confusion and exaggeration [Pls 7.45,46]. Rivera's easel pictures encompassed society portraits, and also images which, although closely related to fragments of his murals, undoubtedly stand on their own [Pl. 7.47].

7.47 Diego Rivera, *Natasha Gelman*, 1943, oil on canvas, 155.5x120 cm., Collection Jacques and Natasha Gelman.