

1942

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Recommended Citation

Duncan, Robert M.. "A Mexican Painter Views Modern Mexican Painting, Jesus Guerro Galvan." *New Mexico Quarterly* 12, 4 (1942).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol12/iss4/4>

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A MEXICAN PAINTER VIEWS MODERN MEXICAN PAINTING

Jesús Guerrero Galván

Translated by Robert M. Duncan

IN MEXICO there exists a movement in art known commonly as the Mexican Renaissance. Such an ambitious term inevitably obliges us to consider briefly the historical nature of this movement and to penetrate if possible our artistic past in order to understand the place occupied by this art which already possesses a universal classical intention within cultural human values and which continues to a certain extent the evolution of European culture. This pictorial movement, paralleling contemporary Mexican poetry, seeks to fix a classical, hence Revolutionary, standard, to capture the eternal moment in time and space, and to keep alive our tradition in the midst of constant change.

This Renaissance has developed along with the Mexican Revolution, which constitutes the frame of the movement and limits it to certain esthetic modes and to traditional popular norms which have acquired universal values with regard to the culture.

The Revolution in itself, on account of its aspirations in human relations, takes on a sense of universality. Theoretically this universality we may understand as essentially the supremely encouraging idea that all men have the human right to the enjoyment of elemental material things as well as to that of poetry. This political phenomenon, because of its national—not *nationalist*—character, moves on the plane of universality. Similar characteristics are to be found in contemporary art which it engendered and which, like it, possesses some of its vices and mistakes. The universality of this art, then, is limited insofar as it is truly national. That nationality is affirmed insofar as it is

individual; that is to say, if one does not have a passionate awareness of the smell and color of the earth he treads, of its past and general characteristics, then there exists no possible nationality; hence no possible universality.

It is in one's work or personal style that we always find the epoch or seal of nationality. A work acquires this nationality by the simple fact of genesis. As it takes form it is limited in time and space and runs the risk of its own nationality, and consequently its possible perpetuity within the universal forms of culture. Contemporary Mexican painting has a background of dialectics; it is an affirmation; it is the negation of a negation; it is a form in constant and gradual change. In its development it has not been unaware of its relation to modern European painting. There exists a noon-day clarity concerning its past and hence its great sense of modernity and esthetic affinity for all pre-Hispanic art. The latter, until a short time ago, considered only as purely archaeological examples, has been found to have a mysterious strength within its heresy and refined barbarity. It has been found to have an impulse of warm vigor and perpetuity which moves us and has reached us as poetic forms capable of definition. Those stone figures (the Goddess of Death, for example), says Cardoza y Aragón, are transformed, become enraptured, they sweat and weep blood. They are clouds of stone which are modified and take the forms which hallucination provokes in us. To be sure, we do not attempt to oppose this art (taboo for us) to European art. Still less do we, with our passion for pre-Columbian art, wish to deny Spanish art which is part of our body and blood. That earthy realism and mystical impulse of the Spanish primitive painters is present in our art. It is necessary to have our feet placed firmly on the ground, but our faces must feel the caress of the clouds. A brief gloss of San Juan de la Cruz is in synthesis the Spanish art which reached Mexico, which incorporated us into modern Western life, and which developed with a strange splendor because of the part played in it by indigenous artists.

Such, in brief, is our past. The Mexican Renaissance can be marked off into these two great periods. Only thus has such an ambitious term any meaning. But after all, whether a work of art be Mexican, or French, or Chinese, the important thing is that it should be authentic. First of all, it must be painting and poetry. And one should not think that this or that art or poetry exists because it is Mexican, Spanish, or French or that such nationality is possible because

of its art and poetry. For beating about the genealogical bush may be as dangerous and may involve as much risk of error, as happens when we investigate the blood and lineage of a person. An art is either accepted passionately or it is rejected. It is either repellent, or it arouses an intense pleasure. If there is an egg, inevitably there must have existed a hen. Respect the life of the hen and do not investigate it if you would have eggs or chicken to eat, and do not ask whence it came; nor should you ask about the rooster. This is what José Bergamín has to say concerning the virginal mystery that exists in every nationality. I cannot forget that fine ardent French nationalist, Barrès, who said that if you wish to be purely national about a thing, you should believe in that thing, but not seek to expose it or to investigate it. *Nation* in this sense is the very opposite of *reason* and consequently of *notion*. An art or poetry which expresses its nationality, characterizing itself in so doing, demands that we eternally respect its mystery.

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Now I shall dwell somewhat upon two of the greatest Mexican painters. I refer to José Clemente Orozco and Alfaro Siqueiros, who represent authentically our artistic movement. I am not concerned with Diego María Rivera on this occasion, for Rivera is the painter most talked about, the farthest from evil, that is to say, from good and evil. He is the one who holds the greatest importance for us, *not* esthetically but historically. Rivera is the painter for all the "isms," for according to the judgment of Rodríguez Lozano (a great Mexican painter), Diego sums up the whole history of modern painting. He starts from classicism, passes through neo-classicism, and then through expressionism, impressionism, cubism, then he passes into Dieguism, from there to Trotskyism, and winds up in *tourism*. As one can see, he is the painter who exerts the strongest attraction on the student of art or on the art critic of good intentions. But I shall leave Diego in peace, since he by no means needs my critical judgments, and speak of the painters who have for me a greater importance.

The great mural painting was born with the Revolution, and with both, José Clemente Orozco. His work suffices to prove to us that he embraces Mexican painting in all its aspects. Orozco began his mural work at the same time as Rivera (1922) by painting the walls of the National Preparatory School. It has been said that no mural painting would exist without Rivera. Orozco's work demonstrates definitely the contrary. People have tried to give Rivera a providential im-



JOSE CLEMENTE OROZCO
National Preparatory School. Fresco

The Trench



JOSE CLEMENTE OROZCO
1940. Oil

Fire



DAVID ALFARO SIQUEIROS
1938. Duco

Weeping Child



DAVID ALFARO SIQUEIROS
Ministry of Education, Oil

Mother and Child

portance which he does not have, and perhaps does not need. Orozco, quite apart from the universal value of his painting, is the receiver of that world which his tormented eye was able to see with implacable cruelty. He who would know the graphic history of the Mexican Revolution need only thumb through a monograph of Orozco to see how much this painter—the most tragic of all Mexican painters—was impressed by what went on around him and how there escaped his glance not the most insignificant detail of horror and misery, or even of joy or pleasure, which his embittered sensibility could take in. His work, however, is not a simple description of the drama which has inspired it. We can find in it a sort of sentiment of sub-realism, rich and full of phantasy. Mexico has always been fertile in the plastic arts. It has always had great painters, but with Clemente Orozco appears the real Mexican painting. He has painted the life of the Mexican people, not the superficial and the picturesque which we find in Rivera, but in its most appropriate, intimate, and recondite aspects. There breathes in this living convulsive tradition of ours a new and traditional poetry always plastic. José Clemente Orozco belongs to the family of artists who sculptured the "Goddess of Death," a thoroughbred painter. What is complicated in his work is precisely that indigenous force, intense and mysterious, which has given it universal value. Orozco's painting is *par excellence* a painting with tradition.

He is deeply rooted in the pre-Columbian plastico-mythical aspect of Mexico as well as in that phase which may be called the universal-Mexican. He possesses an ancient vigor, rich and transcendental, the innate secret of a heroic race. (This same vigor, this same mysterious virtue is what has given nobility to our art and has kept it perpetually modern.) Orozco's painting, says Luis Cardoza y Aragón, causes one to suspect the existence of a certain truculence, a certain emphasis, something like a refinement of horror. There is something formal, he goes on, something intensely spiritual, a certain desperate and bitter sadism that comes down from the past. Orozco's painting is in fact sadistic. The horrible is its chief strength, and, though it may seem paradoxical, its chief beauty too. By means of the eye it produces a trembling, a shudder. Instead of producing a pleasure for the eye, as the scholastics understood esthetic enjoyment, it gives a sensation of anguish, horror, and desperation. Baudelaire, the penetrating and passionate spectator of modern art, says that is not only order and beauty, but also voluptuousness, that is to say, intoxication and de-

lirium—but intoxication in all the senses and in every sense. Horror as a rare kind of beauty has the virtue of producing a strange, intense pleasure, the pleasure of intoxication or of delirium, the pleasure from art expected by the strong, the ambitious, and the thirsty.

On one occasion in an automobile accident I witnessed the burning of some people in the fire caused by the tremendous collision. It was, in fact, when I was on my way to Guadalajara for the purpose of becoming acquainted with the great frescoes of Orozco. As I entered the chapel and saw a gigantic man, like a kind of angel, flying in an endless space, enveloped in flames, with his muscles in spasm and his hands expressing despair, I had the most horrible sensation. And, as I was terribly sick because I had come so near death, I stood there like a statue, cold, without enough will to run away and cover up my eyes in order not to contemplate that nightmare which brought about in me the most complex pleasure. Afterwards I told all this to Orozco himself and it caused him to laugh; and with a certain ingenuousness—for Orozco never likes to theorize about his painting—he said to me: “Well, now I can rest easy, for that is the function that I want my painting to have.” And it *does* have, for what I experienced as I contemplated the work of Orozco supports my statements.

In this fresco to which I refer, whose character symbolizes fire, can be seen Orozco’s terrible imagination. Painting should not be a spectacle precisely, but in Orozco that spectacle is filled with fire and madness. All of that world which he expresses in his painting is a world of nightmare, because Orozco is obsessed by fire and death. Perhaps it is a mystical feeling, a longing for purity or holiness. Art at times purifies, it tends to the cure, to the salvation of the spirit. The Greeks, for example, had these objectives in their tragedies without losing sight of the fact that art purifies human passions.

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David Alfaro Siqueiros is the most passionate of all contemporary Mexican painters. He and José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera form the great trinity which has confronted the European tradition with universal Mexican plastic art. One cannot speak of this painter without enthusiasm, and without a feeling of lamentation. His work and his life are of value for their candid disorder, for their passion and frenzy. He is the only, and perhaps the last, romantic—real romantic, strong and disorganized—which contemporary Mexican art possesses.

Siqueiros is one of the most passionate and well-defined natures of the new generation of Mexican painters. In an apparent coldness and almost indifference to art he conceals a great fervor. He is inconstant, his powerful vitality is dispersed in different activities. He is always organizing strikes, founding syndicates, agitating workers, and the like. He is impulsive in every sense of the word, keen, and almost blind with the fertile blindness of the fanatic. His ideas seem rather prejudices maintained by a moving sentimentalism. His prodigious nature guides him and maintains in him a remarkable plastic feeling which is perfect in its conception of form and volume, with a richness and positive lyric power. Siqueiros is *par excellence* a lyric painter. In spite of his idiosyncrasies he is dominated by an imperative need to express himself plastically. His painting bursts forth, without urging, from his soul. He gives off a prodigious feeling of unrestrained creative power. His painting overflows. It is a constant shout. Its vehemence comes from its gigantic and monumental quality. Its dramatic force is not the fruit of an esthetic discipline, exactly. The dramatic quality of his painting is a true reflection of his personality. There undoubtedly exist in his spirit, in his internal world, that bitterness and tragedy which it expresses, and which rack him desperately, seeking an outlet.

The work of this painter is an exact reflection of himself. It is an endless projection of his own nature. He is, therefore, a romantic. He seeks to deny this romanticism in his work, but the result is an increasing affirmation of it.

His work means to be intimately tied to his mental processes; he tries to reflect in it his ideological attitude, his position with regard to life. But here arises a duality which I consider one of the fundamental characteristics of his work. There exists in all his painting a contradiction which for me is the core of his personality as a painter. He seeks then to tie his work to his ideological attitude and give it a utilitarian value, but we find that his desire is not carried out in all his work, for in spite of his theme and his characters—always symbolic—his painting is enveloped in a religious atmosphere, dark and dramatic, which reminds us of some primitive Spaniards whose mystic or pious theme is not foreign emotionally or esthetically to the painting of Siqueiros.

In his pictures we can see that his characters live in a mysterious world, milling around like souls in torment in desperate dialogue with things. His pictures keep up a kind of violence by means of color where

the painter expresses an intense sensitiveness, especially in the graver tones where a world of reds and blues, deep and terribly dark, are the dominating elements. We can see his hysterical characters stir about with rhetorical gestures like souls in an implacable purgatory; they remind me of that great body of anonymous paintings which abounded in the last century in Mexico and which go by the name of altarpieces or "ex votos." Also, and it is necessary to say it, that atmosphere of Siqueiros' painting speaks to us of Zurbarán and Ribera *el españolito*, and of the great Mexican painting of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from whose schools one will never be able to separate truly Mexican painting. All of Siqueiros' work is saturated with this spirit. Not even his pictures which have the most obvious story to tell and which he considers a strict expression of his mental processes, are without it.

It is not at all strange to find such a duality in this painter of naïve materialism. For I believe that when a conviction is real, it reaches a certain degree of purity and sentiment which creative thought, or that creative power innate in man, transmutes into an emotional subject. But when this conviction is not sufficiently great and pure (for this conviction may be also poetry), then the work is incomplete. Alfaro's painting is intensely poetic, although he does not seek to produce poetry by means of his painting. Poetry is found there despite him; it bursts forth against his will. It is present as a result of the painting itself, an unimistakable sign of every great painter.

I believe Picasso is an inventor only of new plastic forms, although he has created, or rather discovered, new poetic forms through his painting. Poets have discovered that there exists a kind of live wire which intimately joins poetic forms with the world of plastic forms.

The vehemence of Siqueiros has been that of trying out new means of expression, by using mechanical methods of painting, and also new materials. He tries to introduce new elements into the technique of painting. His restlessness has carried him to painting great mural surfaces with an air brush, experimenting with coloring matter of commercial use, as Picasso, Juan Miró, and others did in Europe. But this search for new elements does not tend to a process of refinement as we find in the chief cubist painters, who were the most restless in this regard. David Alfaro seeks to substitute for oil and other archaic methods of expression, the air brush and duco, not like the cubists or dadaists who demanded this type of material, or other types, to flee from

what is common, but because it is a convenient and simple substitution of means. They wanted to introduce these means of expression, along with the category of new poetic elements, into a world of forms also eminently poetic. Such is the case of Miró and Arp. But if Siqueiros does not introduce new means of expression by giving a new value to his painting with the presence of new poetic elements, he has achieved, I believe, a very close and adequate affinity between the sense of forms and the medium of expression. The violence of his forms demands a violent means of expressing them.

These somewhat romantic theories are, of course, not at all new—not even the mechanical devices which David Alfaro thinks to have discovered. The air brush arrived before Siqueiros had even thought about it. It appeared where he did not expect it, and precisely contrary to his intentions. Thus was born his "Collage," by using strange real figures, within a magic and simple realism, but always with an inevitably poetic result.

Siqueiros is of the opinion that the use of pieces of tin, rags, trash, sand, and other materials used by the cubists, was a romantic activity and he has wished to revolutionize this practice by means of machinery and the latest chemical materials. But the result is that he is as romantic as the cubists, with the difference that the cubists worked with the clearest knowledge of their purpose: a poetic purpose—the basis of their romanticism. In Siqueiros the opposite takes place as he seeks to displace the traditional means of expression by mechanical means. Thus he hopes to escape any possibility of romanticism, but if there ought to exist any contemporaneity among form, content, and medium of expression, then there is in him a great contradiction—a contradiction which does not alarm us, because his work and personality are constantly racked by those contradictory forces which finally become the complex and passionate figures of his work.

Easel painting, Siqueiros considers, on account of its size, as outworn and selfish. The individualism of having an easel painting hung on the wall of a room in a private dwelling, he thinks an error. He says that modern painting—his painting—should be for the mass spectator and not for the *élite*. Painting should go out into the street, to the squares, to large buildings, for the multitudes. But as one must suppose that the mass spectator will be in movement, it is necessary to create a three-dimensional, many-faceted painting which this spectator can observe without needing to stop—as one might observe a scene from

all angles while sitting in a movie theater. What is static in a painting should be dead, says Siqueiros. * Baudelaire said that an easel painting was a window where we might see in suspended animation a bit of reality living out its own eternity. But Siqueiros denies this great truth and has in fact applied his theories in experiments which he calls "plastic essays" carried out in Buenos Aires, San Francisco and, finally, in New York.

I do not believe Siqueiros to be alone in his theories, since the cubists also aspired to an expression of constant movement by means of their multiform figures. I believe David has leaned to a certain extent on the cubists' experiences and on their theorizing about three-dimensional, many-faceted painting which can be reproduced in quantity, for the spectator in motion.

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These are the Mexican trinity. Not wishing to unravel any mystery, I shall not discuss who is the father, who the son, and who the holy ghost. They are three distinct painters and only one true painter. Who is this true painter? History will be able to answer justly this rude question.