

# Mexican Mural Art



# Mexican Mural Art:

## *Critical Essays on a Belligerent Aesthetic*

Edited by

Roberto Cantú

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To

Laura, Victoria, Isabel, Dante, and Roberto Cantú,  
my daughters and sons



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Roberto Cantú	

## **Part One: World Politics and Art in Revolutionary Mexico**

Propaganda and Muralism .....	56
Renato González Mello	

El Movimiento Artístico Revolucionario .....	82
Alicia Azuela de la Cueva	

José Clemente Orozco and the Epic of “Greater America” .....	112
Mary K. Coffey	

## **Part Two: Muralism, Philosophy, and the Critique of Visual Arts**

Vano Azogue: de la extensión a la secuencia .....	142
Octavio Armand	

El Ateneo Muralista.....	161
Fernando Curiel Defossé	

Mexican Muralism: Between Art and Philosophy.....	184
Héctor Jaimes	

Thinking Mexican Muralism through Still and Moving Photography.....	199
Leonard Folgarait	

## **Part Three: The Novel, *Corridos*, and Art Movements in Post-Revolutionary Mexico**

Carlos Fuentes, la Novela y el Muralismo: Puntualización.....	220
Georgina García Gutiérrez Vélez	

The Visual Sources of Diego Rivera's Mural <i>Corrido de la Revolución Proletaria</i> (1927-1929).....	241
Dafne Cruz Porchini	
María Izquierdo y Leonora Carrington: El <i>otro</i> movimiento artístico o el <i>otro</i> modo de ver.....	253
Iliana Alcántar	
List of Contributors .....	276

# INTRODUCTION

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*Lo poético no es algo que está fuera, en el poema, ni dentro,  
en nosotros, sino algo que hacemos y que nos hace.*  
—Octavio Paz, *El arco y la lira* (1972:168).

This book of essays is the result of an international conference on Mexican Mural art, hosted at California State University, Los Angeles on April 12-13, 2019.<sup>1</sup> The inspiring forces behind the conference’s organization were the surge of kindred publications in the past thirty years, with significant and challenging interpretations of Mexican Mural art and photography.<sup>2</sup> The noticeable departure from studies considered ideological, historical, or “archaizing” (i.e., Mesoamerican iconography in Mexican mural art), stimulated and provoked ideas about a conference where the aim would be to search for other critical alternatives and yet to build, when auspicious, on existing mural art criticism, both recent and past. Suggested critical approaches included art theory and studies on the art, the lives, and the times of leading figures in Mexico’s muralism, such as José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), Diego Rivera (1886-1957), and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), among others. One random example of a relatively new approach to the study of Mexican muralism is the following:

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<sup>1</sup> To view the full conference program, visit:

<https://mexicanmuralsatcalstatela.blogspot.com/>

<sup>2</sup> For example, Mary K. Coffey, *Orozco’s American Epic: Myth, History, and the Melancholy of Race* (2020); Luis-Martín Lozano and Juan Rafael Coronel Rivera, *Diego Rivera: The Complete Murals* (2018); Matthew Affron et al., *Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism 1910-1950* (2016); Héctor Jaimes, *Filosofía del muralismo mexicano: Orozco, Rivera, y Siqueiros* (2012); Alicia Azuela de la Cueva, *Dos miradas, un objeto* (2011); Leah Dickerman and Anna Indych-López, *Diego Rivera: Murals for the Museum of Modern Art* (2011); Linda Bank Downs, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals* (1999); and, among other titles, Leonard Folgarait, *Seeing Mexico Photographed: The Work of Horne, Casasola, Modotti, and Alvarez Bravo* (2008).

The current notion of Mexican muralism as an ensemble of images of great visual and symbolic complexity, a laboratory in which meanings are constructed, owes much to certain iconological studies that have emerged over the last twenty years. What may justly be called a new vision of this cultural movement has placed in doubt ideological interpretations that read the murals transparently, seeing them as the representation of historical and political themes bound to the social process of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. (Eder 231)

This commentary is justified in questioning methods that read murals credulously, unsuspectingly, thus ignoring the intricate and disconcerting international relations that Mexican muralists lived through, made sense of, and reconfigured on walls. One could also point to an understandable high degree of critical fatigue in relation to Communism, Soviet history, Russian “meddling,” and U.S. and German interests (to name a few) in Mexican politics during the 1920s-1940s. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the art and politics of Mexican muralists would seem to be a thing of the past. However, unexpected political changes in the United States after 2017 have given new life to Mexican muralists in the wake of white supremacists, neo-Nazis, Antifa (anti-fascists), and the alarm and anxiety over Russian meddling in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. Undeniably, Vladimir Putin’s close relations with the White House have only raised unparalleled fears of a rise in authoritarian politics in the United States. It seemed to be the right time to study Mexican mural art in the context of the muralists’ own era, so much like our own, thus open to fresh probes into their art.

This volume of essays returns to the study of Mexican mural art in relation to propaganda, ideology, world history, international relations, and to Mexican history (ancient and modern), therefore not engaging spiritual or iconographic interests in the occult and esoteric traditions—for instance, Masonic, Theosophical, or Rosicrucian symbolism—in Orozco’s and Rivera’s murals. The interest in spiritualism in Mexico and in Latin America during the first two decades of the twentieth century stemmed, in its literary expression, from José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel* (1900), a book that was an extravagant reading of Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* (1611), but with a revisionist application to the alleged “spiritual” heritage of Latin Americans (hence Ariel), in contrast to the materialistic culture of the United States (therefore Caliban). Perhaps Prospero as the play’s magician, with the power to “transform” evil aristocrats into moral and good-natured persons, spawned an interest in the occult. Nonetheless, years later Shakespeare’s play served Cuba’s revolution in a book titled *Calibán* (1971), by Roberto Fernández Retamar, turning Rodó’s argument

upside down: the United States was now Prospero, and Cuba was Calibán, the former “servant” who had retaken his island. José Vasconcelos was an *Arielista* for many years, adding fuel to his mix of admiration and distrust toward the United States. As such, the discourse of “spirituality” in Mexico and in Latin America prior to the Mexican Revolution and in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, was political and international. To illustrate this point: Mexico, a country so close geographically to a world power such as the United States, caught the interest of the German embassy during the first four decades of the twentieth century, historically recorded in the scandal of the Zimmerman telegram (1917), and during Germany’s Nazi period, with Adolf Hitler and swastikas painted in Orozco’s and Rivera’s murals. Another fact: Masonic lodges, and esotericism in general, were oftentimes an artifice and façade for international espionage and interests, economic as well as political.

Recent studies on German spies working for the German embassy in Mexico, such as Felix Sommerfeld (1879-?), and Arnold Krumm-Heller (1876-1949), have contributed to our understanding of the complex international interests—German, Russian, American, among others—that shaped the process and outcome of the Mexican Revolution. Sources confirm that Krumm-Heller met Francisco I. Madero in 1905, and that their discovery of mutual interests in esoteric and healing arts led to a closer relationship when Madero took the presidential chair in Mexico: Krumm-Heller became Madero’s “personal doctor, friend, and esoteric colleague” (von Feilitzsch 287). Based on his studies of Mme. Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* and of Theosophy, Krumm-Heller established “chapters of the Order of the Rose-Croix in Mexico, Chile, Peru, and Bolivia” (290), rising to the rank of “Grand Wizard of the Mexican freemasonry,” thus deepening his friendship with Madero (29-291).<sup>3</sup>

Heribert von Feilitzsch has left record of Krumm-Heller’s several publications on esotericism, Theosophy, and Hindu teachings that were highly influential in Mexico after the revolution, with titles such as *El Zodíaco Azteca en comparación con el de los Incas* (1910), and *Conferencias Esotéricas* (1913). After the assassination of Madero,

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<sup>3</sup> In his article on José Vasconcelos in the classical tradition, Hernán G. H. Taboada makes the following comment: “una curiosidad abierta pero no insólita entre los latinoamericanos de principios del siglo xx, de una difundida manía teosófica que resultó en imágenes literarias, reflexiones culturoológicas y viajes al Medio Oriente y la India [...] Vasconcelos se dejó llevar en este camino por la imitación de modas francesas y quizás por su admiración hacia Francisco Madero (otro seguidor de la moda indológica, aunque más ligado a la teosofía), pero también por la búsqueda de tradiciones culturales distintas a la europea” (106-107).

Krumm-Heller joined Venustiano Carranza and the Constitutionalists, later partnering with Alvaro Obregón against Pancho Villa, and serving with other German agents under officer Maximilian Kloss, whose modern tactics in artillery led to General Alvaro Obregón's victory at the Battle of Celaya (295). Two years into the First World War (1916), the German envoy to Mexico revealed in a letter to the German Chancellor the following inside information: "[Krumm-Heller] has engaged tirelessly in *propaganda* for the German cause through lectures, articles, and leaflets in Spanish, while relentlessly proceeding *against the Allies* [...] As Grand Wizard of the Mexican Freemasons (about 20,000 strong) he is influential in all layers of Mexican society" (297, my emphasis). With the rise of Hitler, Krumm-Heller "supported Nazi elite schools, espoused ideas of racial inequality, and believed in the rise of a superior Aryan race (303). After a life of serving German interests, Krumm-Heller died in 1949 in Marburg, Germany. Von Feilitzsch's scholarship on German-Mexican relations during the first half of the twentieth century sheds a different light on esotericism and the occult in Mexican circles, revealed as "spiritual" bait for a country where a small minority was literate. Orozco's and Rivera's writings and murals are testimony that they did not take the bait.

Orozco's growing esoteric appeal to an expanding school of critics in Mexican mural art had an unexpected but significant blessing by Octavio Paz.<sup>4</sup> In an essay published in 1986, Paz mentioned the early hermetic influence on Orozco by José Vasconcelos, Sergio Francisco de Iturbe (specifically in the mural "Omnisciencia," 1925), and Antonio Caso's aesthetic ideas (1993: 176-177). It follows that when Orozco met Alma Reed and the so-called *Delphic Circle* he had been exposed years before in Mexico to esotericism (e.g., Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, and Freemasonry). Octavio Paz notes that he agreed with Salvador Elizondo that Orozco learned the aesthetic of proportion and the golden section through the writings of Matila G. Ghyka, and the theory of dynamic Symmetry from Jay Hambidge during his years in the company of Alma Reed and Eva Palmer Sikelianos (176). In a footnote to his 1986 essay, Paz alludes to a book edited by Xavier Moyseén, published in 1983 with articles by Fausto Ramírez and Jacqueline Barnitz that coincide and

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<sup>4</sup> A shorter version of this essay was read by Octavio Paz on 12 July 1983 at the *Colegio Nacional* during an homage to José Clemente Orozco (other speakers included novelist Salvador Elizondo and Mesoamericanist Miguel León-Portilla). The essay was later expanded and published in Octavio Paz's literary journal *Vuelta* (octubre 1986), and included in Paz's *Obras completas* (1994). I am quoting from the English translation (1993).

amplify the references to esotericism in Orozco made by Paz and Elizondo during their presentations at the *Colegio de Mexico*. Paz welcomed the scholarship in Moyséén's book, recognizing that "Ramírez emphasizes the affinities between the Mexican painters influenced by Symbolism and Vasconcelos' ideas" (177), adding that "Jacqueline Barnitz's essay contains a wealth of information concerning the *Delphic period*" (177, my emphasis).<sup>5</sup> Paz's habitual curiosity and his bent of mind in favor of artists

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<sup>5</sup> In an article published in 2017, Terri Geiss and Rebecca McGrew question Orozco's following of the Ashram's "esoteric circle" arguing that "[Orozco] occasionally wrote critically of the group in his letters to Charlot and his wife. Part of Orozco's critique *may have* stemmed from his general suspicion toward group activity, whether in Mexico or abroad. As José Pijoán [...] recounts: 'With his fierce individualism [Orozco] was always at odds with mass movements, the mob mind and the assumption of authority' [...] He was surely aware that the revival of Hellenic culture was central to the rising German National Socialist Party, as was specifically outlined in 1925 by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*' (34, my emphasis). Although this quoted passage relies primarily on hypothetical situations ("may have"), and on secondary sources (José Pijoán's account), it contributes to a hermeneutic of suspicion concerning the Sikelianos's "Delphic Circle" and its reputed esoteric doctrine. Angelos Sikelianos' "Delphic Idea," the actual force behind Greek nationalism against the Ottoman Empire (1919-1923), has been viewed as proto-fascist, but not affiliated with Nazi politics. In her biography of Eva Palmer Sikelianos, Artemis Leontis sheds light on Eva Palmer Sikelianos' cultural projects and on Angelos Sikelianos' fascist political leanings (283), with a clarifying observation: "she [Eva Palmer Sikelianos] neither was a fascist nor ever adopted a right-wing agenda. Her investment in individual and group autonomy, belief in a diversity of ways of being, and work to develop techniques of self-expression to help liberate the creative impulse against the crushing uniformity of consumerism conflicted with the more authoritarian strains latent in the Delphic Idea" (160). The Delphic Idea was Angelos Sikelianos's project to "make Greece strong again" (123), particularly after the 1919 Smyrna disaster (Glenny 383). After the First World War, Great Britain (with Woodrow Wilson's backing) had supported the idea of "Greater Greece" to include Greek regions in the Balkans, itching for a return to the glory of the Byzantine Empire, one that would include Istanbul and Greek cities in Western Asia Minor. The invading Greek army, driven by centuries of hatred and a thirst for revenge, left a trail of blood in Smyrna, to be followed by military losses to Turkey (Glenny 383). It is at this time that Angelos Sikelianos created the Delphic movement, to be led by the "elite" of the world, later changing the name of the movement to "the Balkan Idea" (Leontis 124). At one point--as Leontis reveals--Angelos Sikelianos began to study "utopian visions that generated successful revolutions, tried to cross into the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic but was stopped at the border. He returned to Greece alone. Eva went on to Paris" (125). Orozco's widely-known irony led to his inclusion of Stalin in the mural cycle at the New School for Social Research (1930-

or critics who venture onto untrodden grounds led him to applaud the essays by Fausto Ramírez and Jacqueline Barnitz, but only in relation to symbolism, Vasconcelos' ideas, and the *Delphic period*; on the other hand, Surrealists from André Breton to Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington had been interested in esoteric traditions, a beguilement shared for many years by Paz (Byatt viii-ix, Kaplan 171-172). In any case, on the trail of Ramírez's and Barnitz's findings, Paz consulted Alma Reed's biography of Orozco and related sources from which he made inferences that at the time seemed logical but that subsequent scholarship and publications have proven to be inaccurate. For instance: "Angelos Sikelianos and Alma Reed shared a huge apartment, known as the Ashram. It was a meeting place for artists and writers interested in hermetic and esoteric doctrines. In politics they were fervent supporters of the movement for Indian independence. There was talk of aesthetics, Alma Reed says, and of the doctrines of the great masters: Jesus, the Buddha, Lao Tse, Zoroaster, Emerson, Gandhi" (176). This brief passage contains several misconstructions and errors of judgment, also found in recent esoteric studies of Orozco's mural at the New School of Social Research (1931).<sup>6</sup>

In her biography of Orozco, Alma Reed confirms that she shared the apartment with Eva Palmer Sikelianos, not with her husband (32), later leased by Reed herself (33). Eva had left on a lecture tour through the United States in search of financial sources for her projected second Delphic Festival. To pay for the lease, Reed opened an art gallery that she named *Delphic Studios* (76-77). Conversely, Angelos Sikelianos led the nationalist *Delphic movement*, while Eva Palmer Sikelianos focused her interest in the *Delphic Festivals*, of which she funded two (1927, 1930), resulting in her bankruptcy and utter poverty for the rest of her life. Lastly, there is no reference at all to a *Delphic Circle* with esoteric interests; it was called the Ashram or *Delphic group*, a kind of salon or meeting place for intellectuals and artists of different backgrounds and interests who continued to gather at the Delphic Studios, with meetings described by Reed as follows:

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1931), and yet the Soviet leader's iconographic representation and political role in Orozco's painting are generally ignored, on occasions unsuspectingly interpreting his portrait as part of Orozco's rendering of Alma Reed's "Ashram."

<sup>6</sup> To consult a selection of studies of Orozco's mural cycle and its esoteric symbols inspired by the "Delphic Circle," and specifically in its Masonic, Theosophical, or Rosicrucian traditions, see Renato González Mello's edition (2002). For studies of Diego Rivera's alleged esotericism, consult Luis Martín Lozano's and Juan Rafael Coronel Rivera's lavish edition (2018).

Its guest list [the Ashram's] was a cross-section of all the arts and professions: poets, painters, educators, journalists, religious teachers, musicians, dancers, philosophers, archaeologists, theater folk, scientists. Men and women devoted to public welfare as directors of humanitarian or charitable foundations were also among the Ashram's frequent visitors. They came not only to explain their own intellectual or aesthetic interests, but to learn from the scholarly Mme. Sikelianos the facts of the Delphic movement and of her program for re-establishing ancient Delphi, the *omphalos*, or navel of the earth, as a center of universality. (33).

Artemis Leontis, in her recent biography titled *Eva Palmer Sikelianos: A Life in Ruins* (2019), writes about Eva's early years at Bryn Mawr College where she studied Greek, read Sappho's poetry, and began an affair with Natalie Clifford Barney, an openly lesbian interlude that Eva terminated in 1906. Eva later traveled to Europe with the intent to live in Greece, where she met Angelos Sikelianos, who was then ten years younger than Eva. Leontis writes that Angelos married Eva for her money, later asking her to cover the costs of his Delphic movement. Eva's interests in Aeschylus' plays, Byzantine music, and ancient Greek weaving, mark an intense moment in Eva's self-creation: she proposed to Angelos the idea of festivals at Delphi and, in 1912, ended sexual relations with Angelos, agreeing to his keeping as his mistress his cousin Katina (68). At this point, Eva began her own *askesis*, took an upward flight, went "native" in Greece, thought through unseasonable "countercultural" concepts such as "transcendent untimeliness," "techniques of living in opposition to modern [Nazi] times," and "alternative modes of living" (183), ideas that were inscribed in her autobiography *Upward Panic*, published in 1993, hence more than forty years after her death. Such a rich intellectual and spiritual life is brilliantly researched and narrated by Artemis Leontis, lifting Eva's life beyond the esoteric tale of a "Delphic Circle" that never existed.

Studies of this scope are evidence that Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros, including other Mexican muralists, were caught in an international network of interests and conflicts from day one, often beyond their comprehension or control. Such is the aim of the essays selected for this volume: to propose alternative theoretical and critical perspectives on Mexican mural art, distinguishing between aesthetics in its relation to beauty and taste, and the aesthetic Mexican muralists sided with: belligerently against "bourgeois" taste in art; against capitalism; against the Mexican government (e.g., the Calles régime), against Stalinism, against Trotskyism and, at times, against each other. Thus, the title of this book.

## I

*Mexican Mural Art: Critical Essays on a Belligerent Aesthetic* opens with the section “World Politics and Art in Revolutionary Mexico.” In the lead essay “Propaganda and Muralism,” Renato González Mello recalls what sparked his interest in Mexican muralism during the 1980s: the radical “revisionist” interpretations of the Mexican Revolution by a 1960s generation of historians, and his growing sense that the history of Mexican mural art was in need of critical re-examination. After such premises, González Mello turns his attention to a comprehensive exposition of four murals by different artists (Diego Rivera, Rufino Tamayo, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Pablo O’Higgins/Julio Castellanos), and of one work by Manuel Felguérez (“Homenaje a Uxmal”). The analysis unfolds along two parallel lines: on the one hand, he studies important murals by Mexican artists commissioned between 1929-1964; on the other, he illustrates the political rise and crisis of Mexico’s ruling party, from the “Maximato” of Plutarco Elías Calles (1929-1934), to the Presidency of Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964), thus tracing the close ties between muralists and the ruling Mexican Party throughout its three different permutations (1929, 1938, 1946). As is evident from his opening lines, González Mello enters into his essay with an agenda of his own: first, he alludes to muralist Jean Charlot’s 1963 book on the “Mexican Renaissance” in which Diego Rivera’s politics are defined as treacherous; second, he refers to art critic Raquel Tibol who, as the reader learns, was initially very close to David Alfaro Siqueiros, but subsequently quarreled with him and dismissed the work of the “Three Great Ones,” charging them with inconsistencies and pretenses. Such criticisms, which could be considered irrelevant in matters of art, are introduced as striking attempts from insiders (a fellow muralist, an art critic) to question the alleged servile, accommodating, and parasitic relations between muralists and the Mexican government.

To illustrate, González Mello turns his attention to Siqueiros and to his complicity with Mexico’s ruling Party as staged during the presidency of Miguel Alemán (1946-1952), who funded Siqueiros’ mural *El hombre amo y no esclavo de la técnica* (1952). Commissioned for the student dormitory of the *Instituto Politécnico Nacional*, this work by Siqueiros, in González Mello’s judgment, is an imitation of Rivera’s *Man at the Crossroads* (1934), reproduced by Siqueiros as an allegory of Mexico’s industrialization and as an “homenaje al esfuerzo impulsor del

Presidente Alemán.”<sup>7</sup> Such reverential homage and the like to a “right-wing” Mexican president were embarrassments thrown on the muralists’ faces by members of the *Generación de la Ruptura* who, for the most part, did not seek any form of patronage from Mexico’s ruling party.<sup>8</sup> There were, however, exceptions and González Mello refers to Manuel Felguérez’s “Homenaje a Uxmal” (1964), a geometric Maya-style structure that fuses modernist and archaeological traits associated with Mexico’s *mestizo* identity. Felguérez (1928-2020) was a Mexican artist associated with the *Generación de la Ruptura* whose members battled and broke with the Mexican Mural art movement between the 1950s-1960s. “Homenaje a Uxmal” was commissioned by Mexico’s National Museum of Anthropology during the Presidency of Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964), who in his student years had fallen under José Vasconcelos’ spell, actively campaigning on his behalf during the 1929 presidential election. As González Mello informs us, the Museum was under the patronage of Secretary of Education Jaime Torres Bodet, and was designed by architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, a high ranking officer in the Mexican Government.

The thematic association of “Homenaje a Uxmal” with Mexico’s *mestizo* identity has its own persuasive pull if one assumes its source to be José Vasconcelos’ *La raza cósmica* (1925). As he conceived the theme of his commission for Mexico’s National Museum of Anthropology, Felguérez—knowing of President López Mateos’ youthful admiration of Vasconcelos—perhaps read Vasconcelos’ memoirs which, in fact, include a revealing chapter titled “Uxmal y Chichén-Itzá.” As head of Mexico’s *Secretaría de Educación Pública*, Vasconcelos traveled in 1921 to Campeche and Yucatán with a select group of artists and writers: Diego

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<sup>7</sup> Commenting on diplomacy and economic relations between Mexico and the United States during the late 1940s, Nibble wrote the following: “The new president, Miguel Alemán, was certainly one of the politicians most deeply involved in creating links between the U.S. and Mexican elites [...] A constant stream of corporate leaders passed through Alemán’s Acapulco, cementing deals while enjoying the good life” (222).

<sup>8</sup> Two years after Siqueiros’ death, Octavio Paz was interviewed for Mexico’s supplement *Uno más uno* (1978). To the amazement of the interviewer, who assumed Paz was Siqueiros’ enemy, Paz replied: “Es vil rebajar a nuestros adversarios. Siqueiros fue un pintor de gran talento, dueño de una inteligencia lógica y de una habilidad polémica que no es frecuente hallar entre los artistas. Su temperamento lógico lo llevó a idolatrar los sistemas y esta perversión intelectual lo convirtió en un sectario fanático [...] No fue el único entre nuestros contemporáneos: son muchos los que en nuestro siglo han adorado a esta divinidad abstracta y feroz. Apenas si necesito citar a los más conocidos: Pound, Sartre, Neruda” (Paz 1994: 217-218).

Rivera, Roberto Montenegro, Adolfo Best Maugard, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Carlos Pellicer, and his personal secretary: Jaime Torres Bodet. Vasconcelos' host in Yucatán was Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto, a socialist politician emblazoned with the Communist's hammer and sickle symbols, and backed by Plutarco Elías Calles, Mexico's *Ministro de Gobernación* under the Presidency of Alvaro Obregón. In his memoirs, Vasconcelos describes Carrillo Puerto as an honest man, modestly educated, and whom he convinced to replace the *trapo bolchevique* with the Mexican flag (1982: 95). While writing these pages in his years of exile—lucid, fresh in his memory—Vasconcelos recalls his thoughts on Mexico's history, and his understanding and agreement with Carrillo Puerto's political response to the cruelty and selfishness of the old “*hacendados de la época porfirista*” (90), but regretting the hatred of rising “*revolutionary*” agitators who called for the “*death to the bourgeoisie and reactionaries*,” all along with plans for their own self-enrichment. Through their travels with their socialist host, Diego Rivera was alert, drawing sketches and taking notes. Vasconcelos writes about their trek by train and on horseback to Uxmal's archaeological ruins, and describes the site's main structures—el Templo de los Guerreros, la Casa de las Monjas, el Juego de Pelota and, among others, el Caracol—and feels the vertigo of Mexico's ancient history as he takes stock of Maya architecture and evident mastery of geometry and astronomy: he reflects on the fact that the Maya had no knowledge of the wheel but did grasp the importance of the spiral, the ladder, and the tower that allow mankind to observe the stars. This is proof, Vasconcelos claims in his memoir, of heaven's magnetic hold on humanity's will to transcend one's mortal condition (“*En la estructura denominada El Caracol, surge una sospecha de que hubo allí pensamiento [...] el alma de los mayas sintió la necesidad de subir para librarse de la tierra confusa y brutal,*” 1982: 107). From such thoughts, Vasconcelos glimpsed Mexico's political future in the microcosm represented by a naïve Felipe Carrillo Puerto, surrounded by “*radicals*” selected and empowered by an emerging Calles, who was then planning to climb his own ladder to national power. At the time of the 1929 presidential elections, Vasconcelos unsurprisingly ran against Calles' favored candidate, Pascual Ortiz Rubio.

When Diego Rivera returned to Mexico City, his fate had taken a different turn: he joined the Mexican Communist Party in 1922, launching his life-long communist propaganda in images of hammers and sickles, beginning with murals commissioned for the Ministry of Public Education (1923-1928). Among these murals, Felipe Carrillo Puerto (assassinated on 3 January 1924) is painted in the Courtyard of Work (third level), with

Vasconcelos portrayed among “Los sabios” (“The Wise Men”), sitting on a small Indian elephant—Rivera’s sarcastic association of Vasconcelos and his book *Estudios indostánicos* (1920)—with his back turned to the viewer, hiding under the comforting arms of a female figure resembling Antonieta Rivas Mercado (1900-1931), an important Mexican patron of the arts and major funding source of Vasconcelos’ 1929 electoral campaign.<sup>9</sup> Vasconcelos would leave record of this “infamy” in his memoirs: “Diego, que ya se había puesto a pintar en los muros de la Secretaría, arriba de las decoraciones por mí sugeridas [...] me retrató, en el patio posterior del edificio que había yo levantado, en posición infame, mojado la pluma en estiércol” (1982: 260-261). With this in mind, Felguérez’s “Homenaje a Uxmal” can be interpreted beyond a national identity constructed merely on the concept of *mestizaje*; instead, it is an art piece that synchronically reunites José Vasconcelos, Jaime Torres Bodet, Adolfo López Mateos, Diego Rivera, and a young *Ruptura* artist in a museum project that was, in its total conception, an homage to Mexico’s ancient Mesoamerican civilization, commemorated through a spiral of ages in Mexican history—Colonial, Independent, Revolutionary—according to Vasconcelos’s realization that long ago “thought”—which aspires to spiritual freedom—had taken place among those ruins.

González Mello also studies an important mural by Diego Rivera painted in Mexico’s National Palace (1929-1935), ostensibly exemplifying Rivera’s talent for procuring and securing the support of important patrons and politicians. There are other views: Bertram Wolfe places this mural in relation to Rivera’s entire work and considers it his finest achievement (1963: 345). The painting of this mural was commissioned in 1929, the year of a presidential election during which Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928), founder of the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR), acted as the powerful man behind the party’s candidate, Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930-1932). The inaugural sponsor of Mexican muralism, José Vasconcelos, ran as the presidential candidate of the *Partido Nacional Anti-reeleccionista*. In his memoirs (“El Proconsulado”), Vasconcelos gives a full account of his 1929 presidential campaign, adding that Mexico’s Communist Party was represented by its candidate, Pedro Rodríguez Triana, who along with him lost to the PNR’s candidate (878). Rodríguez Triana was supported by Mexico’s *Bloque Nacional Obrero y Campesino*, headed by Diego Rivera and Ursulo Galván. The evidence

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<sup>9</sup> In his early and insightful analysis of this mural, Bertram D. Wolfe comments: “Diego responded by painting Vasconcelos in the ballad series among the disseminators of false knowledge, seated, in sign of this *theosophy* and ill-digested Oriental mysticism, upon a little white elephant” (211, my emphasis).

raises the suspicion that during the 1929 presidential elections, Diego Rivera had second thoughts about the outcome of the Mexican Revolution; thus, he appears to have accepted Stalin's mandate to plan the overthrow of Mexico's government through armed militias (if in fact this was the case, Rivera's mural "In the Arsenal" could be viewed as a proclamation of a subversive intent).<sup>10</sup> By late 1929, however, Rivera was enjoying a very successful role as the official painter of murals in Mexico's National Palace (1929-1935) and, through the graces of U.S. ambassador Dwight Morrow (1927-1931), had received a commission to paint the murals in the *Palacio de Cortés* in Cuernavaca, titled *The History of the State of Morelos: Conquest and Revolution* (1930-1931). It is also a fact that Rivera was expelled from the Mexican Communist Party on July 1929, thus months prior to the 1929 Presidential Elections. Logical questions to raise: could it be that Plutarco Elías Calles and Diego Rivera outsmarted Joseph Stalin? In placing Rodríguez Triana as the candidate of the "block of peasants and workers," did Rivera "block" José Vasconcelos' election chances and thus help Calles' favorite nominee win the presidency? As González Mello specifies in his essay, the recently-founded party "needed an electoral campaign strong enough to face the *Vasconcelista* challenge." Or was it just resentment on the part of Rivera due to his expulsion from the Mexican Communist Party that led to his sudden turn and

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<sup>10</sup> On his return home from Moscow in 1928, Rivera experienced a portentous incident that took place while at sea: a huge red ball appeared over the waters and settled on "a greenish-white bank of clouds" (red, green, and white: the colors of the Mexican flag). Rivera recalled the experience as follows: "At that moment the conception of the National Palace stairway mural which I had begun to plan in 1922, flashed to completion in my mind" (*My Art, My Life* 94). As he sailed across the Atlantic ocean, Rivera was preparing to face another fateful curve in his life: he carried in his pocket Stalin's mandate "to organize the peasants' and workers' electoral bloc in Mexico" (93; for a slightly different version of such a "mandate," see Wolfe 1963: 221). Siqueiros recalls that when Rivera home-landed in Veracruz, "Rivera was put on a pullman to Mexico City"; Siqueiros, on the contrary, boarded "a second-class coach and then from the station to the penitentiary" (Stein 1994: 61). In her biography of Tina Modotti, Patricia Albers clarifies the purpose of Stalin's "mandate": "The Comintern's hotheaded new policies dictated tactics of belligerence and class confrontation [...]. In Mexico, the traditional, right-wing [1929] election year insurrection was under way, and the Party's [Soviet] strategy was to recruit workers and peasants into armed militias that loyally charged into combat [...] the masses were to outflank authorities and retain power in liberated territories, where the long-promised land would be distributed and the people would govern through soviets" (221; see also Folgarait, 2008: 54, 121).

“collaboration” with the Calles regime? I leave it to the experts to clarify the complexity of Diego Rivera’s political activities between 1928 and 1935. In any case, the response of the Mexican government was swift and brutal: it banned the Mexican Communist Party in 1930, leading to executions by firing squads, followed by forced entry into the Party’s headquarters, destroying printing equipment and materials, and “dragging militants off to prison” (Albers 222).

The obscure dynamics of this political election, and traces of its conflicts in the elaborate composition of Rivera’s mural, led González Mello to Folgarait’s illuminating study, which opens other possible areas of analysis in the context of the 1929 electoral feud and Mexico’s political state of affairs in 1929-1935. Folgarait’s article “Revolution as Ritual” (1991) remains one of the most valuable sources for anyone attempting to thematically grasp Rivera’s National Palace mural, an all-embracing portrayal of Mexico’s past, present, and projected future in the mural’s three walls with their seven lunettes from which Rivera’s art emerges according to staggered historical stages.<sup>11</sup> Folgarait’s observant ability to distinguish a pattern of conflict across the entire mural, beginning with the Aztecs’ imperial demand for tribute from vanquished nations, the defiant responses, and the ensuing “class warfare between the warriors of the régime and its slaves” (19), underlines the coherence and structural unity in a mural that marks a break in Rivera’s relation to Mexican history (no longer a conflict between the “bad” Spaniard” against the “good” Indian). From questions of thematic content Folgarait turns to intricacies of form, stressing three important conceptual features: first, that this mural encrypts the entire temporal and belligerent system governing Mexico’s past, present, and future, therefore the central wall should be read vertically,

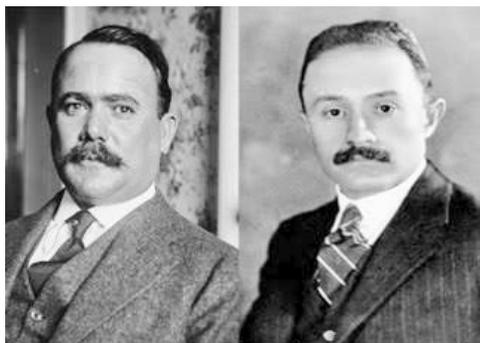
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<sup>11</sup> A prior and, for its time, a wide-sweeping analysis of this mural is that of Bertram D. Wolfe, who wrote discerning pages on this same mural in two separate sections of his 1963 biography of Rivera, first on its six walls (1963: 261-267), followed by a close analysis of the concluding seventh wall known as “Mexico Today and Tomorrow” (344-347). Wolfe viewed the mural as follows: “He would paint the epic of his people [...] All he knew of his land and its history, all he could learn by study and taking thought, he put into his work--not merely all he knew, but all he felt and sensed, gloried in or thought worthy of contempt or shame. Was this not the nation’s palace? Was it not fitting then that the whole nation, its past, present, and ‘inevitable’ future, should live on these palace walls?” (261-262). In this biography, Wolfe thanks Rivera (posthumously) for allowing him to consult all personal files from which he transcribed numerous and important correspondence, essays, and notes written by Rivera, referenced in Wolfe’s first biography of Rivera (1939) and also cited selectively in the second biography (1963: 5).

from Ancient Mexico to a post-Revolutionary, capitalist State; second, that it is to be experienced as a ritual that bridges the “before and after” of a viewer’s transformation; third, that in a post-liminal stage, the viewer’s transformative experience should result in a historically-conscious citizen, “subject to and of the nationalist [and capitalist] content of the mural” (31). This is a logical and compelling analysis, but let us not forget that it is a ritual-directed reading based on the viewer’s transformed condition, consequently one that theoretically crosses out and removes Folgarait’s critical presence. A question to raise at this point: if Rivera meant to alter and transmute his hypothetical viewer into nationalist citizen in a capitalist State, what about the proposed pattern of conflict and “class warfare” from Aztec times and Mexico’s present, to a future allegorized by Karl Marx? Perhaps Folgarait’s *transformative ritual* should be read ironically when correlating the publication date of his article (1991) with the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), associated with electoral fraud, economic mismanagement, and political assassinations. I will return to these questions and to Rivera’s mural at the National Palace before closing.

In her essay “El movimiento artístico revolucionario,” Alicia Azuela de la Cueva examines the same relations between muralists and post-Revolutionary Mexico, but from a different angle. She describes Mexican mural art as a movement that connected and bound the ethical-aesthetic interests of its artists to those of the revolutionary State. She clarifies that such close alliances between artists and governing leaders were established throughout the different phases of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921); however, with the consolidation of Alvaro Obregón’s presidency (1921-1924), the State needed a cultural imagery that would legitimize its recent political foundation. Mexican muralism is thus analyzed as a fundamental part of the “Mexican Renaissance,” a concept that Azuela associates with the civilizing and cultural mission of José Vasconcelos, Mexico’s *Ministro de Educación Pública* (1921-1924), and with the State’s power legitimacy and proposed goals of national education and the reconstruction of Mexican culture. The contractual ties were explicit: on the one hand, the State would be the source of budget and expenditures for artistic and educational programs; the muralists, on the other, would effectively intervene in areas of ideological and artistic creation, loyally portraying (but soon challenging) the State’s political and cultural policies. The new revolutionary order under Obregón created, as a result, a trinity of synonyms: Revolution, Reconstruction, and Artistic Renaissance. Beyond her account of Mexican muralism and the State’s policies, Azuela’s essay charts a conceptually-unified development of the

origin and realization of the “Mexican Miracle” (1940-1970), highlighting murals painted during two major periods in post-Revolutionary Mexico: an initial one that shifted from socialist to Moscow-inspired imagery, and from anti-clerical policies to the nationalization of Mexico’s natural resources (1924-1938). In the second period, Mexico veered toward industrial and economic progress (1940-1970), with closer ties to the United States during the Second World War and the Cold War. Azuela’s expansive analysis of Mexican muralism covers from 1921 to the 1950s, with the “Three Great Ones” (Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros), shouldered by a densely-populated community of artists with murals whose description is clearly based on Azuela’s research and personal (and revisited) careful analysis. Azuela makes the valid argument that although Mexican muralism was proclaimed as “public art,” its complex iconography and historical references required a cultural capital possessed only by the artists themselves and a small elite in Mexican society. Azuela’s commentaries on Diego Rivera’s murals in the National Preparatory School (1922), the National School of Agriculture in Chapingo (1924), the Ministry of Public Education (1926-1931), and in the National Palace (1929-1935), serve as the core of a constellation of references to murals by José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and to other artists seldom discussed in related publications, such as José Chávez Morado, Luis Nishizahua, Miguel Tzab, Grace Greengood and, among others, Isamu Noguchi.



President Alvaro Obregón and José Vasconcelos (circa 1921)

Azuela brings her study to a close with a brief but well-focused examination of Miguel Alemán’s presidency (1946-1952), and its emergent “miracle” in Mexico’s economy, its political stability, and its cultural diversification. In terms of the latter, Azuela alludes to the close

collaboration of architect Mario Pani and painter Carlos Mérida in a project known as *Integración Plástica* that conjoined architecture, sculpture, and painted murals with mythological content and atavic geometric forms evoking Mexico's Mesoamerican civilization, but with no overt political advocacy. Walking on a tightrope, Mexico's State-sponsored art managed to move back and forth from representational or figurative art to abstract expressionism. As the granddaughter of Mexican writer Mariano Azuela (1873-1952), who launched the narrative cycle of the Mexican Revolution with the novel *Los de abajo* (The Underdogs, 1915), Alicia Azuela de la Cueva tells a complex but revealing tale: a few years after Alemán's term, Mexico's governing Party began to tumble and crack under the presidency of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) who, days prior to the opening of the 1968 Olympic Games (testimony of Mexico's "Miracle"), ordered the repression of a student rebellion, resulting in the massacre of hundreds of people. This crime and abuse of power have not been forgotten by Mexican artists and writers, a point made by other contributors to this book. The irony was not lost on the audience when these essays were presented at Cal State LA in 2019: namely, a president's abuse of power could lead to impeachment, and most certainly to be inscribed in a nation's historical memory.

In her biography of José Clemente Orozco, Alma Reed recalled an article in Dartmouth College's *Student Life* with impressions on the guest muralist: "Orozco has a lively interest in social problems and in living history [...] With the keen interest of a thinker he points out similarities and differences as he talks; with the vision of the artist his thought jumps like a flash from Rome to Russia or from Florence to Mexico City" (185). This portrait of Orozco is richly expanded by Mary K. Coffey in her essay "José Clemente Orozco and the Epic of 'Greater America,'" where she underscores two salient features in Orozco's Dartmouth mural: first, it is the only mural where Orozco combined his knowledge of Mexican history with a critical vision of U.S. America and its "regional exceptionalism"; second, this is also the only mural where Orozco engaged the themes of race formation and national identity north and south of the U.S.-Mexican international border. Orozco's mural, titled "The Epic of American Civilization" (1934), is hemispheric in scale and legendary in inspiration, underlining the theme of "forces, constructive and destructive" as illustrated in the myth of Quetzalcoatl who is described as a Mesoamerican deity both autochthonous and "living." According to Coffey, Orozco created a variant of the founding myth with the promise of Quetzalcoatl's return now rewritten as a prophecy that *has remained unfulfilled*, hence the shared responsibility of the two Americas to create a

New World Civilization. A recognized authority on Orozco, Coffey guides us through a methodical and exhaustive analysis of the complex structure of this mural, but centered on the “Modern” wing only so as to examine closely Orozco’s critical response, from a Mexican point of view, to established assumptions during the 1920s-1930s in relation to Manifest Destiny ideology, pan-Americanism, and U.S. American *antiempire*. Coffey’s analysis—broad and innovative in its critical approach—draws our attention to three unexpected perspectives or ways “to see through” Orozco’s idea of Quetzalcoatl’s prophecy: to begin with, she claims that Orozco’s fresco is best understood as a “performative rite” through which the viewer (in the 1930s, a white American from the New England region) submits to a radical re-*education* in the American epic, emerging transformed after the experience as a “border-subject,” while the mural room becomes a “deterritorialized borderscape”; second, Coffey tacitly brings Orozco’s mural to our political moment in the United States (the Donald Trump administration) as a critique of “white nationalism” and Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again” (it is countered with Orozco’s “Epic of ‘Greater America’”); third, Coffey draws a transhistorical nexus between Orozco’s encrypted radical politics of *Latinidad* and the work of early Chicano historians. As expected, Coffey’s sweeping study of Orozco’s Dartmouth mural is grounded on extensive research on Frederick Jackson Turner’s influential “Frontier thesis” (1893); on James Truslow Adams’ history of the United States *The American Epic* (1931); the astute U.S. co-optation of the *Latinoamericanismo* tradition represented by Enrique Rodó, José Martí, and José Vasconcelos’ *La raza cósmica* (1925);<sup>12</sup> Orozco’s mural response to the pan-American “reproductive romance” of Waldo Frank’s *The Re-Discovery of America* (1929); Herbert Eugene Bolton’s lecture at the American Historical Association titled “The

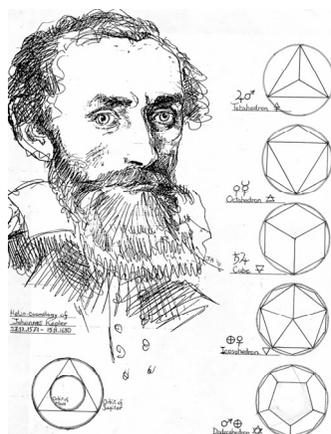
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<sup>12</sup> In the mid-1970s, I proposed and organized the Chicano Studies Publications Center at Cal State LA, launching three editorial projects: first, *Escolios: Revista de Literatura* (1976-1979); *Piel menos mía*, a volume of poetry by Octavio Armand, was published as a special issue of *Escolios* in 1976. Second, *Campo Libre: Journal of Chicano Studies* (1979-1984). Third, the *Pensamiento Mexicano* series, in which my first (and last) edited volume was the bilingual edition of José Vasconcelos’ *La raza cósmica/The Cosmic Race* (1979). Listed at \$3.50 per copy, this bilingual edition quickly sold out. In 1996, Johns Hopkins University Press was granted permission to issue this edition of *La raza cósmica/The Cosmic Race* with the copyright credited to California State University, Los Angeles. José Vasconcelos thus entered in 1979 the Chicano Studies curriculum with an educational spirit akin to Orozco’s *Epic* mural at Dartmouth: in the recumbent image of a young Afro-Mexican American youth reading a book, lifted and ennobled by thought.

Epic of Greater America" (1932), followed by the polemic sparked in response to Bolton's thesis by Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman, a well-known polemicist who, with a lawyer's training, seldom lost a debate. As a conclusion to her interdisciplinary study, Coffey gives an account of a 2002 performance titled *OrozcoMEXotica Guillermo Gómez-Peña Underground at Dartmouth*, staged in the Orozco room where Gómez Peña identified the performing group *La Pocha Nostra* as "Orozco's evil grandchildren," with transformative possibilities as Chicanoized Mexicans or *Chicanglos*. Coffey succeeds on two other fronts: she transforms Orozco into our contemporary; the reader, on the other hand, finds possibilities for a temporary transformation into a "border-subject," admittedly a daring classification to fall under in the currently xenophobic United States.

Part Two, "Muralism, Philosophy, and the Critique of Visual Arts," opens with an essay by Octavio Armand titled "Vano Azogue: de la extensión a la secuencia" in which the critique of the visual arts is extended—sequentially and retrospectively—to poetry, narrative, music, and sculpture. Approaching art as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total art work from modern to ancient times, Armand arranges his critique into seven sections, four of which attend to painting and the novel, and with the concluding three eliciting a versed interpretation of Shakespeare's sonnet 104. The essay's title—"vano azogue"—is launched as an extended metaphor from beginning to end, like spheres of quicksilver zigzagging in a play on words: "*azogue*" (from Arabic *zāwk*) meaning mercury, mirror, the market place ("zócalo"), or to be "restless"; and "*vano*" (from Latin *vanus*) to be read as null, illusory, unreal. As an opening gambit in a polyglot board, Armand directs our attention to "Escapando de la crítica," a painting by Pere Borrell del Caso (Catalonia, Spain, 1835-1910), from where a youth, unaware we witness his escape, breaks out from a frame toward a three-dimensionality we thought was our exclusive domain. The animated and thus theatrical representation in Borrell's art is duplicated or "twinned" in another painting ("Dos niñas que ríen") from where a blue-ribboned girl, embraced by her sister, points a friendly index finger at the viewer who, in amazement and disbelief, speculates about *la ilusión de la realidad* and *la realidad de la ilusión*. From this point onward, the analysis spins toward and across Lewis Carroll (Borrell del Caso's contemporary), and to Alice's alternative worlds reached either through a rabbit hole or by means of a looking glass. As Armand proclaims, mirrors, frames, and paintings are not always associated with innocence: at times they function darkly and perversely, as in *Dorian Gray* in Oscar Wilde's eponymous novel (1890) where a beau preserves and hangs on to his

youth, while his painted image decays. Attention to Dorian Gray's "real self," bound to a painting, is followed by an adulterous love affair in Tintoretto's "Venus, Mars, and Vulcan" (1551), with an analysis, sense of humor, and verbal virtuosity in full display: after all, these are gods who lust and mate behind Vulcan's back, the *senex amans* of ancient Greek and Roman comedy who is now depicted frontally and on a back mirror as a cuckold. In these spirited frames and hall of mirrors, Armand continues to speculate, now on a painting by Diego Velázquez ("Las meninas"), on Sigmund Freud and the archaeology of the unconscious and, among other themes mercurial and impermanent, on a selection of Egyptian deities associated with fertility and death, such as Apis, Isis, and Osiris. This essay's beguiling play on themes of innocence, love, beauty, decay, and death leads to Shakespeare's poetry, and to Armand's sustained reading of Sonnet 104, under which he admits to being under its spell since his youth, held captive by the music and conceptual precision of fourteen lines that praise the beauty and unalterable youth of a loved one, from the sonnet's first line ("To me, fair friend, you never can be old"), to its lamenting last ("Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead"). As an allegory of Armand's critical piece, John Keats enters stage (but in a *footnote*, therefore reverently *en-graved* under the essay) as yet another charmed reader of Shakespeare's sonnet 104, and as the quintessential poet who lived briefly but whose attuned ear could hear the tremulous trill of a nightingale in Shakespeare's sonnet, heard only by the soul (*ye soft pipes, play on;/ Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,/ pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone*). Digging deeper in time and in another, more ancient grave, Armand reflects on the Keros Harpist, a marble figurine with no arms, but who nonetheless strums on invisible strings, hundreds of years before Pythagoras spent sleepless nights listening to the music of the spheres. In this essay's "history of art" *in reverse* and across two seas (Caribbean, Aegean), Armand races after the White Rabbit, falling from moments of innocence and maturity to infirmity and death, conscious of three trial-related tasks: to be receptive to *lo sentido, el sentido, y los sentidos* (to what is emotionally felt, to meaning, and to the senses: above all, to the eye and the ear!). In the end, the reader is caught in a miniature-size Globe Theatre, participating in a drama composed of fourteen lines whose undying plot is the unresolved conflict between "reality" (framed by calendar time), and "desire," stubbornly blind and deaf to the ticking of time's passing.



Between February-April 1942, Orozco wrote his autobiography, brief but of lasting significance, marking its end in 1934, the year he finished his Dartmouth mural commission. While writing about the history of muralism and his role in it, Orozco appears to have acted on memory alone, with no diaries, journals, or history books within reach. His frequent references to memory's fickle nature ("As I remember it," "I do not remember"), add to Orozco's conversational and spontaneous recall of past events. In his attempts to stir up memories of the "origins" of Mexican muralism, he credits José Vasconcelos for summoning artists and intellectuals to collaborate on the monumental task on behalf of national literacy and the arts; however, a few particulars remain a blur (or so he claims): "I do not remember how or why Rivera returned from Europe. But Siqueiros was called home from Rome and the two rejoined the artists who had remained in Mexico" (86). In his essay "El Ateneo Muralista," Fernando Curiel Defossé writes about the history of Mexican muralism, from its "Genesis" to "Revelation," from its origin to its visible signs of moral and political decay, thus indirectly answering Orozco's question with documentary evidence of Diego Rivera's early participation in the genesis of Mexico's mural movement. A historian who knows the history of Mexico by heart, a literary critic, poet, and radio announcer, Curiel Defossé draws from different fields and a variety of topics related to Mexican muralism, guiding the reader through apparently distant or unrelated accounts that nonetheless cohere at the end. The essay's mural-like composition, with a variety of interpretations of the history of Mexican mural art and post-Revolutionary Mexico, is traced with evident mastery of the subject, at times formulated through satire, irony, or understatement so as to encourage the reader to think critically and

independently. Curiel Defossé opens with a reference to controversial Mexican President Luis Echeverría (1970-1976), described as “tenaz, peligroso” with a politically-infectious disease that subsequently tainted his successors. Rumored to have schemed the 1968 student massacre in Tlatelolco during his post as Mexico’s Secretary of the Interior (1964-1969), Echeverría cunningly re-invented himself as a Third-World leader at the dawn of his presidency, with friendly ties to socialist and Communist governments (e.g., Cuba, Chile, The People’s Republic of China). Shortly before the end of Echeverría’s term, Philip Agee—a former CIA case officer stationed in Mexico City—published *Inside the Company: A CIA Diary* (1975), identifying several Latin American presidents as CIA agents or collaborators, among them Echeverría. Curiel Defossé refers to the gala reception organized by President Echeverría in Mexico City in honor of Salvador Allende, the socialist leader and President of Chile (1970-1973). During Allende’s visit, it was agreed to celebrate Allende’s third presidential year with an art exhibition in Chile’s *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*, to be advertised as “Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros: la pintura mexicana.” The planned celebration, subject to History’s unfathomable schemes, resulted instead in Allende’s murder and in the political overthrow of his government, led by General Augusto Pinochet, allegedly with CIA support. The Mexican mural art exhibit, destined for Chile in 1973, was finally held in the *Museo Carrillo Gil* in Mexico City on December 2018.

After this suggestive opening, Curiel Defossé crafts a broad survey of Mexican art, beginning with the 1781 founding in Colonial Mexico of the *Academia de las Tres Artes* (architecture, painting, and sculpture), renamed in 1785 as the *Real Academia de San Carlos de la Nueva España*. The first to be founded in the Americas, the *Academia de San Carlos* was originally planned with the intent to educate indigenous peoples of Colonial Mexico. In 1902 this institution hired Catalanian painter and sculptor Antonio Fabrés (1854-1938), who taught his students the skills needed to solve complex pictorial compositions and the taste for the exotic. In bridging apparently disconnected fields, Curiel Defossé contends that the proficiency and competence learned under Fabrés by José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera—distinguished alumni of this institution—were decisive for the birth of Mexican muralism. Turning in his mind the spirit of the “Sixties” in Mexico, and between generations distanced by a century (1860s/1960s), Curiel Defossé considers the 1860’s “counter-culture” generation—e.g., Benito Juárez’s reforms, and their cultural implications for modern Mexico—and votes in favor of the greater glory of the nineteenth century’s version, with its embrace of Mexico’s

Republican ideals and modernist movements in poetry, fiction, the essay, and in painting. As exhibits for his argument, he points to the literary journals *Revista Moderna* (1898-1903), and *Savia Moderna* (1906), created by a young generation whose members included philosophers, poets, and painters who challenged the cultural foundations of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship, thus as precursory sentiments that found full expression in the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Curiel Defossé alludes to the *Ateneo de la Juventud*, with leading members such as José Vasconcelos, Alfonso Reyes, and Diego Rivera. Curiel Defossé takes up the theme of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, and refers to José Vasconcelos' participation in the civil war on the side of Francisco I. Madero, and to the latter's exceptional and far-reaching role in Mexican education, literacy, and the arts (1920-1924). Vasconcelos is justly credited as the mastermind and major force behind Mexican mural art, inviting, alluring, and funding the work of promising and gifted artists such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Roberto Montenegro, Jean Charlot, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, to name a few. Questions raised by Curiel Defossé touch on the essential features of Mexican mural art, particularly when he cites from *muralismo mexicano. Mito y esclarecimiento* (2018), a book by Eduardo Subirats (Barcelona, 1947), a critic whose keen interest in Mexican muralism has produced two positive judgments: first, that Mexican muralism is the favorite son of the Mexican Revolution; second, that Mexican muralism achieved a successful art integration of the arts, among them architecture, painting, and sculpture (the colonial "trivium" in the Academia de San Carlos). Two extraordinary examples of such a success: Siqueiros' Polyforum (1971), and the artist's mural titled *La marcha de la humanidad* (1966-1971). Knowing of Curiel Defossé's bent for irony and satire, one should temporarily bracket his references to Subirats' book.

At this concluding juncture, Curiel Defossé circles back to the beginning of his essay. He recalls a frank and unsparing conversation on Siqueiros' art that took place in 1972 with Henrique González Casanova (a celebrity at UNAM), and Luis Cardoza y Aragón (a leading expert on Mexican muralism), while Curiel Defossé drove his Volkswagen "Beetle" in front of Siqueiros' Polyforum. Amid the banter and sneering, *La marcha de la humanidad* was judged by the trio of friends as totally lacking in *integración plástica*, assuming instead the semblance of a "tin can" failure. The substance of this conversation summarizes the protracted, conflictive and the unprincipled relations between the PRI (Mexico's governing political party from 1929-2000) and Siqueiros, the last of the "Three Great Ones." From said colloquy on a speeding Volkswagen Beetle, several points give insight into the last specimen of Mexican mural