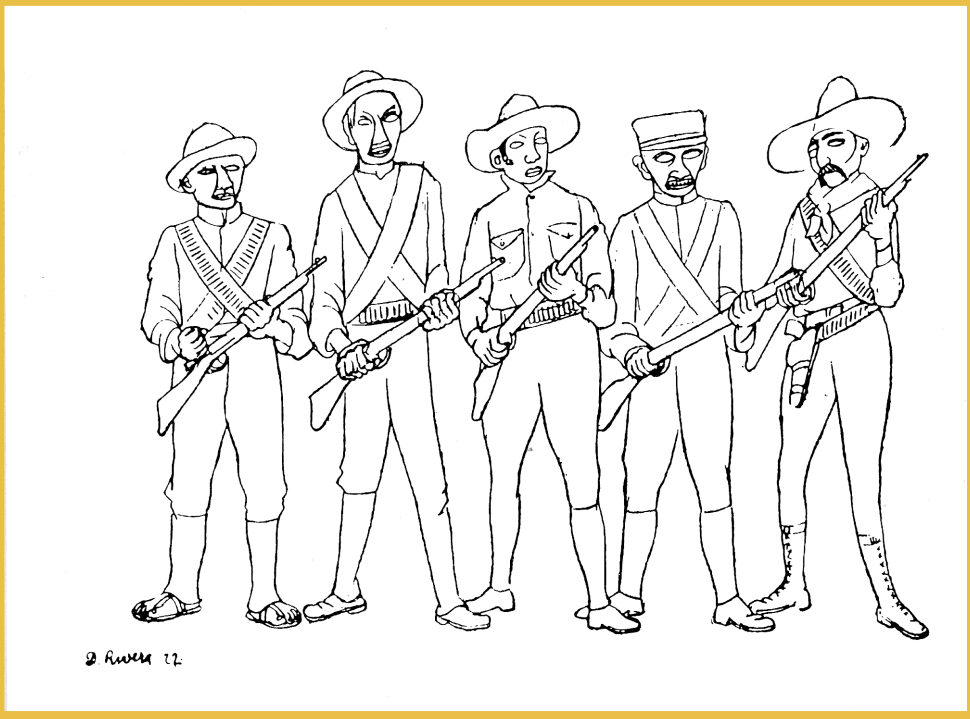
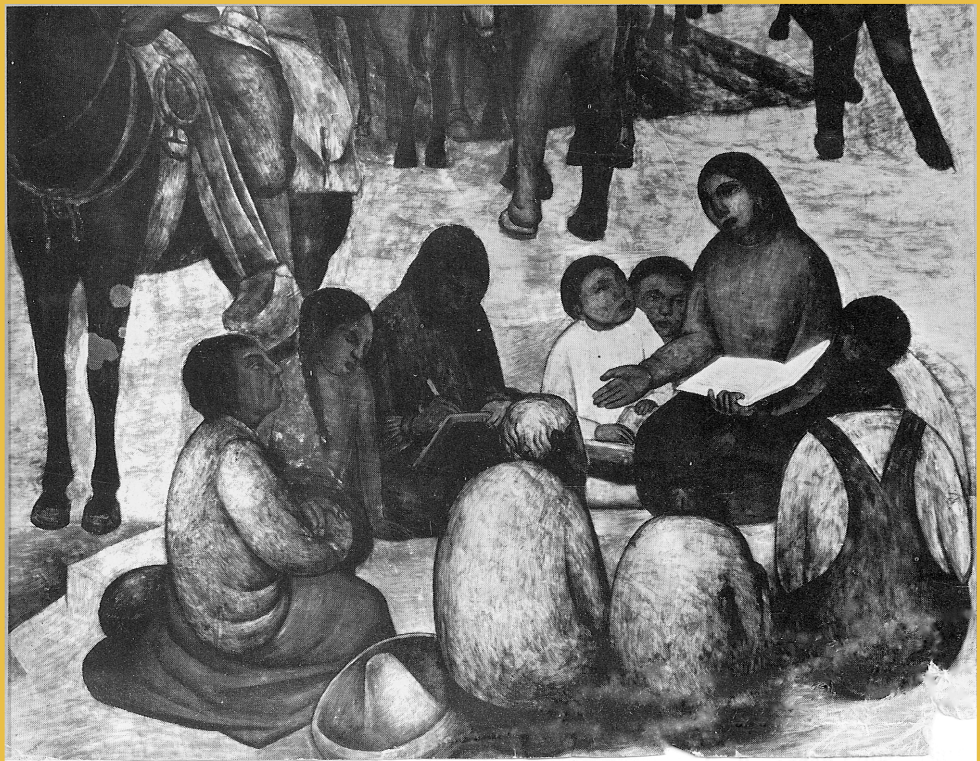
JEAN CHARLOT



THE MEXICAN MURAL RENAISSANCE

1920 - 1925



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THE MEXICAN MURAL RENAISSANCE 1920-1925

BY JEAN CHARLOT

One of the aftermaths of the Mexican Revolution was a rebirth of mural painting, and Jean Charlot was among the handful of artists who evolved the new idiom and endowed it with a style specifically Mexican. He has now written a history of the first five years of the movement, fortifying his memory of people and events by extensive research in private papers and governmental archives.

As an insider, Mr. Charlot has been able to recapture the flavor of the period and produce a wealth of new information about it. He writes with warmth, as one reliving his youth, and with the authority of his many years as a practicing artist, art historian, and teacher.

Beginning with an account of the centuries-old mural tradition in Mexico, he discusses, one after the other, the renaissance artists in order of their emergence as outstanding muralists. Some names—Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco—are already known; some will be new, even to the well informed.

JEAN CHARLOT is Senior Professor of Art at the University of Hawaii.

Critical comment on the book

"The publication of this volume marks the appearance of the most complete account yet to appear of the formative period in the history of Mexican mural painting. . . . An important source of information for historians of Mexican art, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance* has long been needed in the field, and its high standards of scholarship assure it an unqualified welcome." — *Hispanic American Historical Review.*

"This is a very important book, perhaps a great one, without polemics or politics, without a hero except the movement itself, or better, the spirit that infused the movement. Charlot uses many sources besides his own experience: the old diaries and notebooks of his colleagues, memoirs published and unpublished, manifestos, newspaper accounts friendly and hostile, and the reminiscenses of several artists especially written for this book. . . . Forty years later, still 'peaceful and introspective,' Charlot looks back at the events which rocked the scaffolds of the Dieguitos. The artists of the Mexican renaissance are in his debt, and so are his readers who will be more than entertained and moved; they will learn something about the creation and re-creation of art." — *Yale Review.*

"[The book] is one of the most remarkable achievements of one of the most remarkable men alive. . . . [The author's] linguistic versatility — French, Spanish, English, Hawaiian — is extraordinary in itself, but what is much more extraordinary is the brilliance of his literary style. Charlot writes about the Mexican mural renaissance with a Frenchman's dry, ironical wit mixed with a certain bluntness that is rather more American in character than anything else. He has a marvelous eye, ear, and nose for human idiosyncrasy, and his cast of characters — painters, politicians, bandits, generals, plasterers — is magnificently rich." — *San Francisco Chronicle.*

"Charlot's latest contribution to Mexican art history is an engrossing account, for he himself participated in that memorable outburst of creative activity. . . . Informed laymen as well as scholars will be interested in this valuable contribution to Mexican art history." — *Library Journal.*

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

The Mexican Mural Renaissance

1920–1925

THE MEXICAN MURAL RENAISSANCE

1920-1925

by Jean Charlot

New Haven and London, Yale University Press

Second printing, February 1967.
Set in Spectrum type and printed by
Joh. Enschedé en Zonen, Haarlem, Holland.
Reprinted in the United States of America by the
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Library of Congress catalog card number: 62-8238

To Zohmah

PREFACE

This book records the beginnings of the contemporary Mexican mural renaissance, especially the activities during 1920–25, when Siqueiros, Orozco, Rivera, and the others groped through their first mural tasks, not yet knowing where they would emerge. My desire to tell its story comes in part from a concern for the history of aesthetics, for to have assisted at the birth of a national style is a rare event, as well worth recording as the birth of a volcano. But I have been moved also by a more subjective urge, inasmuch as the story of the making of the Mexican renaissance encompasses the autobiography of my early twenties.

All this happened close to half a century ago. In writing about it now I am reminded of the sequel to *The Three Musketeers,* similarly separated in time, in which the once dashing friends make rheumy tries at repeating the capers of their youth. The painter grown gray need not feel as spent as did those aging roustabouts. As the muscles sag, one may still hope for a second freedom to blossom, as it did with Renoir, though his body was jackknifed in a wheelchair and the paintbrush had to be lashed to his gnarled, paralyzed fist.

From among the personae of this true story, Rivera, Cahero, Revueltas, Orozco, and De la Cueva are dead. As for the living, they have mostly settled into a pattern of substantial achievements. But there is always this difference between today and what existed twenty-five years ago: each artist now breathes and works within his patented originality as snugly as the waterbug within the airbubble it hoards.

Of the early murals I describe here as they were when still in the making, some are now destroyed and many another has been defaced or repainted. Those few that remain intact show limitations, hesitations, and technical faux pas, mixed with no little juvenile bluster. Yet the vast output of murals painted since then, and often

by the same men, only rarely outclasses these trial pieces. A climax of a sort was already reached in 1923–24 by Rivera in the scenes from Tehuantepec frescoed in the Ministry of Education, by Orozco in his set on the life of Saint Francis, and by Siqueiros in "Burial of a Worker," both located in the Preparatoria School. What came later —some of it frankly grandiose—did little more for the fame of the painters than stiffen the live aspen wraith to gold.

Such nostalgia for the good old times as I knew them is qualified by a sturdy faith in the present and future. Mexico never claimed to offer the traveler the patented and framed tableaux that await him in lands which pride themselves on a well-packaged tourist trade. Mexican sights are constant only as regards mutation. An intermediate generation of painters had already risen while ours matured. It too was made up of true muralists who were most successful where we had failed, that is, at communal painting. As their work falls outside the time limits of this book, they rate a story of their own. Today, still younger men are at work. What we did stirs them to no more than a vague retrospective interest, for the newcomers are unashamedly romantic. Their mood calls for techniques more exquisite than true fresco, and for intimate formats. Thus it appears that the mural renaissance may spend itself within the lifetime of its pioneers.

I should like to thank Professor Norman Holmes Pearson of Yale University for his valuable editorial assistance in the writing of this book; and to acknowledge my indebtedness to the Trustees of the Guggenheim Foundation for the fellowship awarded me in order that the book might be written.

J. C.

1963

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CHAPTER 1

Indian Roots

Mexican tradition is a spark that oscillates between two equally valid poles, Indian and Spaniard. Since the times of the conquest, the Indian element has stood as a symbol of national integrity and, in the opinion of those in power, of unrest.

As early as 1565, in the half-hearted attempt at seceding from Spain known as the Ávila-Cortez conspiracy, the colonists' suspicions were aroused when Alonzo de Ávila entered Mexico City at the head of a fantastic cavalcade of Spaniards masquerading as pre-Hispanic chieftains. Three centuries later, during the Maximilian interlude, political cartoons of the opposition featured an Aztec girl, lavishly plumed, who stood for the nation free of its French invaders.

The contribution of the Indian to Mexican culture always surges to the fore in times of political unease, not so much in a racial claim as in a symbolical pennant; for Mexican bloods are so thoroughly churned that the *cura* Hidalgo, a white Creole, upholds Indian rights in history, while Porfirio Díaz, a bronzed Mixtec, personifies the oppression.

As befitted a movement born of a revolution, the mural renaissance leaned lovingly on Indianism. But whereas the term can be questioned in its political implications, its meaning remains impeccable on the aesthetic level. The Indian artist has splendid achievements to his credit. With the added mystery of an indefinite recession in time, and a flavor of empires returned to dust, Indian archaeological remains stand in relation to Mexican art as Greco-Roman ruins and fragments did to Renaissance Italy. Differences in outlook

between Greek and Indian aesthetics are so fundamental, however, that the two forms can be compared only on the high plane of quality rather than that of form. For an understanding of the contemporary Mexican artist, one must realize that, as he tests for strong roots of tradition in his cultural subsoil, he finds that his own classics enshrined horror over beauty and reserved for the representations of physical pain and death the glamour that the Greeks had allotted to lust (Fig. 1a).

To survey the interweavings of the many pre-Hispanic cultures, one must, perforce, simplify. The gist of the innumerable art forms that Mexico had known before Cortez may be at least suggested by observing the affinities and the contrasts that mark two of its better-known civilizations, the Mayan and the Aztec.

The stylistic cycle of Mayan art follows the universal scheme. It started from archaic forms and culminated in genuine classical purity; then, tapering through the excesses of the baroque, Mayan art vanished together with the civilization that had developed it. Just before the end, a reaction of purism or neoarchaism gave birth to some of its most exquisite monuments.

Lovers of virtuosity for its own sake will point with pride to the *dentelles de pierre* of Mayan stelae, unsurpassed in complexity in the history of monumental sculpture. Through decorative spirals, volutes, and curves, men and animals, gods and monsters, intertwine their bodies to match the surrounding tropical exuberance. By a sort of aesthetic mimetism, chunks of stone were remade by man into a semblance of the inhuman jungle.

But some facets of Mayan life and Mayan thought were not represented in this elaborate boast flung by sculptors to an everripe nature. A sober taste guided the authors of the "Beau Relief" of Palenque and, some eight hundred years later, the fresco painters of Chacmultun. On plain backgrounds, personages clad in peplumed gowns move with refined stance, their slim bodies as elongated as possible. How the nervous spirituality that palpitates in these works would clash with the Greek athletic ideal that gave such rustic health to both men and gods! The quasi-morbid attitude that these reliefs immortalize is still the appanage of modern Mayans.

How such languid-looking androgynes were able to build and keep in working order the complex machinery of their society is better understood by those who have seen Mayan masons lazily lift and carry on their heads weights under which one of our strong men would stagger. This small group of art works stands closest to us, being endowed with a psychological flavor that lends itself to our own humanistic habits of thought.

But in the usual Mayan scheme of things, man was far from playing the dominant role. He was a well-nigh useless addition to a universe in which planets, stars, and an innumerable and complex host of gods glided in orderly orbits. To live his life without crossing the invisible ellipses on which these mysterious beings moved was man's most pressing need. Hence the priest controlled all, art included. The metaphysical subjects proposed by the sacred magicians to the hired artist were, by a happy accident or a racial affinity, exactly those that suited his gift. The Mayan sculptor was most interested in abstractions. The use of line, of volume and color, for nondescriptive, highly intellectualized purposes was as natural with him as an objective fidelity is to the camera.

The oldest forms of human representation (Stele 8, Naranjo) are realistic enough to tend toward caricature. Soon however, with the growing ability and ambition of the stonecutter, the conception widened. Anatomical proportions became monstrously distorted, and the wealth of liturgical garments and ceremonial paraphernalia crept vinelike over the human shape, soon humbling it to the role of a mere peg for symbols. The human features remained visible for a time, then disappeared in turn under a fantastic god-mask, depriving the present-day spectator of even this last refuge for his too strictly anthropomorphic appreciation of art. The typical Maya monolith was meant by its makers as an encyclopedia of dogmatic knowledge. Once an accumulator of religious energies, it is now, with its meaning mainly lost, still a center of plastic ardor.

Sculpture is the supreme fruit of southern Mayaland, which—at a time when Americanists fancied they knew more than they now know they know—was called Old Empire Culture. Perhaps mural painting is the best vehicle that remains today to express the

plastic thought of northern Mayaland, known once as the New Empire, whose Mecca was Chichen Itzá.

The Temple of the Tigers is a small lookout that rises above the ball court of Chichen Itzá. The small temple served a purpose similar to that of the chapel annexed to the arena, in Spain, where bullfighters kneel before the kill. There, players prayed for victory, referees sat in judgment, and there the winning team received its prize. Because of its many wall pictures Stephens called this building in 1840 the Sistine Chapel of America.

The best preserved of its murals represents a battle fought on a field spread between the thatch-roofed houses of a tribe and the raised tents of its besiegers. The warriors, over a hundred of them, use round shields and long javelins. One lies spread-eagled on the green, a spear through his thigh. While men give and receive death, their women shuttle from home to the front lines with provisions. In the village a few crones and oldsters squat on roofs, unmoved by the unfolding epic.

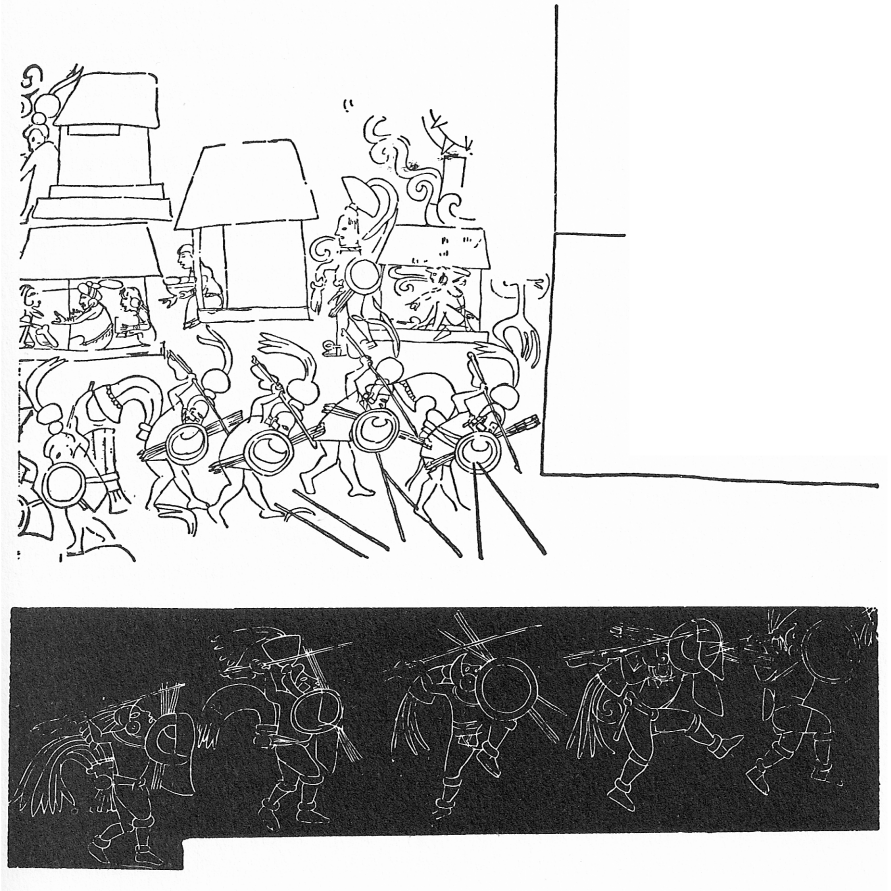
The painter has engineered a masterly game of geometry, playing the circle of the shield against the straight line of the spear. Diagonals surge upward from the outside toward the center. Each individual drama adds its sloping segment to make up the hidden pyramid, which is the painter's compositional goal (Text figs. 1, 11).

In the lower part of the panel, intended as the foreground, plumed chieftains negotiate, seated on low stools beside dome-shaped tents. Boldly rising over the friezelike scene, two standards are topped by an apparition of the senior god, enthroned in the solar disk fringed with light rays. The spiritual climax of the picture, this vision is also its plastic climax. The vertical pennants and concentric sun motifs echo, amplified, the two contrasting geometrical units that scaffold the picture.

This battle piece plays its role in the formative period of the modern mural movement. Diego Rivera was deeply impressed when, fresh from Europe, he saw it as he toured Yucatán in December 1921.

The simplified myth of Spaniard versus Indian is hard to uphold when we see the Mayan culture confronted by the Aztec, that latecomer on the Mexican scene. Their arts were antithetic. Mayan

sculptors created tours de force that pockmarked the monolithic boulder with deep pits, and scalloped its outline with such ruthlessly skillful delicacy that, against a sunset sky, it is hard to tell where the true foliage ends and the stelae begin. Aztec sculpture, in its



I, II. Spearmen in battle, detail from a mural, ca. 13th c., Temple of the Tigers, Chichen Itzá. Tracing by Jean Charlot.

austere simplicity, illustrates better than the Mayan the loving interchange that should exist between the sculptor and the material he chooses. The Aztec standard for good sculpture is identical with that of Michelangelo: to be proclaimed beautiful the statue

should roll intact from the top of a mountain to the valley below (Fig. 1b).

Most admirable among Aztec remains are those egg-shaped stones that lack a base and refuse a pedestal, as if the sculptor had carved them not for any static display but rather to nestle in the palm of some giant fist. While the coralline "locust" and the jade-green "gourd," now in the Mexico City Museum of Archaeology, mimic a bug and a fruit, they also emphasize their quality of being hard stone, as if the tools of the artist, however successful in their delineation of the subject, were as attuned to the material as weather erosion. The same respect for organic laws accounts for the beauty of the *teponaztle* wood-carvings, where the ocelot is coiled and ready to spring, and yet remains so truly wood that the roughened weathered grain and split trunk do not detract from, but add to, the sculptor's achievement.

Aztec sculpture is self-sufficient, not intended to convince or to please. It easily acquires the form of boulders long under water, as if the spiritual stream that shaped it used a working logic akin to hydraulic forces. To handle it with eyes closed is to gain a knowledge keener than that which can be gathered through sight. It seems that, overlooked in a jungle, the statue would yet breathe a kind of hibernated life, like a cocoon, and that, buried underground, it would continue to exude a kind of silent existence, like a bulb. Yet its spirit remains remote. Neighboring shapes fold over each other as do the wings and elytra of a heavy beetle in the act of landing, as if to better protect a meaning buried by centripetal forces at the innermost core of the rock. Far from opening a window on the mood or meaning, eyes, mouths, and nostrils guard the soul of the sculpture under the triple lock of their self-contained and self-sufficient Indian forms.

Aztec painting is said to be merely writing, but letters too have a style. Ages before Montezuma, councils of ancients had wed each color to a complex of subject matter: terre-verte for vegetation and death, blue for water and jewels, red for blood and stars, *puzzole* for earth and male flesh, yellow for felines, priests, and female flesh, black for hell. On the flat backgrounds of the Aztec codices, split or

quartered in heraldic colors, live forever the squatting, gesticulating knob-kneed pygmies eternized on lime-coated paper of maguey fiber since long before Columbus was born.

The conquest failed to suppress Indian aesthetics. The Roman Church in Mexico soon acquired a native tang; paper rosettes, sacred dances, and self-tortures crept like pagan ivy over the rock-old dogma. Heaven nodded its approval. Not only did the Guadalupe appear on an Indian fiber *tilma*, but the averted face and joined hands, dark against the ashes of roses of the robe and the ash blue of the mantle, were unmistakably Indian flesh—cinnamon hues waning to olive.

In 1810 Hidalgo raised the humbly robed Virgin against a Spanish one, "Our Lady of Los Remedios," doll-size, dressed up in a stiff pyramid of gold-heavy brocade. Minus its common denominator—Our Lady—the clean statement that remained already pitted modern Mexican aesthetics against those of Europe.

Again Indianism rose in the 1860s as republic crushed empire, and with a proper cast, playing the blond Habsburg versus the jade-dark Juárez. Lithographs popularized the Aztec calendar stone which had become a national pride. But soon after, Díaz the renegade bleached his face and hands, and the Mexican esteem of things Mexican sank.

The retrograde progress of the Díaz regime is told by two successive contributions to Paris world's fairs: 1889—The national pavilion was "a restoration of an Aztec temple, the high slate-colored walls rising in impossibly steep steps, and surmounted by strange and forbidding statues of kings and divinities"; 1900—"Today, as befits a modern and civilized nation, the representative building suggests a modern palace, in the neo-Greek style so prevalent in the Mexican capital [!], the principal façade on the Seine... preceded by a perron flanked by sphinxes."[1]

Again Indianism was the traditional force of the twentieth-century revolution. This time both leads were miscast. Indian Díaz was the villain ousted by the Indians' savior, pink, bearded Madero. Indianism matched the political rise of a people come to the capital

1. W. Walton, *Chef d'Oeuvre of the Exposition Universelle*, Philadelphia, 1900.

from crags like Tepozotlán, where the beat of a teponaztle is still heard, where sonorous *nahuatl* discourses are still publicly flung to the night sky. Walnut-skinned Guadalupes dangled from the giant brims of Zapatista sombreros. The Mayan Obregón rode over the map roughshod, with his Yaqui warriors. And soon frescoes on Indian themes forced their way over the walls of the capital's public buildings.

An appreciation of Indian art on aesthetic grounds could not exist as long as the ideals of artists and critics were patterned after those of the Italian Renaissance, often debased to a composite Madonna of Raphael's flesh and da Vinci's smile. The next generation idolized photographic realism and its apostles, Gérôme and Meissonnier, together with many a painter of tearful chimney sweeps and merry monks. Naturally, pre-Hispanic art offered them only slim pickings. José Bernardo Couto gave the gentleman's dictum when, in 1860, he had this to say of Aztec paintings: "One should not look in them for a knowledge of chiaroscuro or perspective, or a taste for beauty and grace... They failed to express moral qualities and the moods of the soul... and showed a certain propensity to observe and copy the less genteel aspects of Nature, such as animals of disagreeable aspect."[2]

As long as such standards reigned, the painters who favored Mexican plots expressed them in the manner of their European teachers, although in such pictures, Aztec gentlemen invariably shamed the white savages with their better manners. In the 1870s Félix Parra, later praised by Rivera as "upholder of the cult of ancient American art," presented Cortez as a ruffian, his spurred boot on the carcass of a dead Indian. The widow and child looked with horror at the armored cad. In his desire to win the spectator to the underdog, the artist transformed the female into one of the Roman peasant models, kerchief included, popular at the time in Italian academies. In the 1880s Leandro Izaguirre, future teacher of Orozco, painted in "The Torture of Cuauhtemoc" the partial roasting of the last Aztec emperor.

To bear stylistic fruits, the lessons incipient in Indian art had to

2. *Diálogo sobre la historia de la pintura en Mexico*, Mexico, 1872. Text dated 1860.

wait for the vindication that cubism afforded them. Only then did artists and critics minimize the implications of subject matter, stop reminiscing about other types of masterpieces, and insist on an appreciation of plastic purity. The luck that we experienced in that regard was potluck. We approached Indian art with a panoply of prejudices as European as that of previous generations; but the wind had changed. International art currents now eddied close to pre-Hispanic shores.

To praise Indian art, we had what men of good will had lacked in the mid-nineteenth century, a key to its plastic significance. From Cézanne on, the cone, the sphere, and the cylinder acquired esoteric meanings. Picasso threw in the cube. Severini, Metzinger, and Rivera brewed a cubist alchemy of the fourth dimension by sliding cardboard and rotating wires in an intoxication of discovery. Their none too metaphysical painters' brains throbbed for a while at the limits of the visible. Beyond this, physical painting could not breathe.

Gino Severini quoted Rivera in 1917 as saying: "A being living in a world with varied refractions instead of homogeneous ones would be bound to conceive a fourth dimension." Severini added: "This milieu with distinct refractions is realized in a picture if a multiplicity of pyramids replaces the single cone of Italian perspective."[3] These hard-won glimpses into an art perhaps possible on another planet became amazing vistas of reality for the plastic pilgrim come from Paris to the National Museum of Mexico City. But the Aztec pyramids, spheres, cubes, and cones, far from retaining, as did the cubist ones, a whiff of classroom dampness, were cogs, pistons, and ball bearings that one suspected had cosmic functions. They sublimated another fetish of Paris, the machine. Aztec theogonical sculptures, Coatlicues, great serpent heads, blood basins, sacrificial and calendar stones suddenly appeared as classical preforms, illustrating the fiercely rational trend that had just rid painting of all the bootblacks shooting craps, the cardinals eating lobster, and the naked women that passed for art only a generation before.

Though I was born and bred in Paris, and did pass through the École des Beaux-Arts, my rattles and hornbooks were the idols and

3. "La Peinture d'avant-garde," *Mercure de France*, June 1, 1917.

Mexican manuscripts from my uncle Eugène Goupil's collection. They were also my ABC of modern art.

Early in this century, when the Parisian vanguard, having hacked its way through uncharted stylistic jungles, proudly returned with its strange trophies, the displayed grotesquerie looked familiar and somewhat tame from such an Amerindian vantage point. Just having known *calli*, the Aztec hieroglyph that signifies "house"—a cube of space contained in a cube of adobe—watered down the angular landscapes of Braque and Derain into little more than a mild departure from impressionism. The flat colors of the codices, with raw chromas paired in refined discord, could pass as the goal toward which the Matisse of "Music" and "Dance" took his first hesitant steps. The anatomies that Léger put together with ruler and compass were doubtless veering away from Bouguereau, but still had far to go on their semimechanical legs to equal the frightfully abstract countenance of a Tlaloc or Tzontemoc. Idols combined the moroseness of a 1916 Derain with the mathematical innuendos of Juan Gris. A few were spared in the comparison: Picasso's evisceration of objects matched the fierceness of an Aztec ritual knifing.

Into this mold of pre-Hispanic art, understood in terms of a plastic present, the group of muralists poured whatever human meanings were dominant at the social moment; in other words, political Indianism was the breath that informed plastic Indianism.

In 1921, in the opening manifesto of the movement, Siqueiros stated: "We must come closer to the works of the ancient settlers of our vales, Indian painters and sculptors, Mayan, Aztec, Inca, etc.... Our climatological identification with them will help us assimilate the constructive vigor of their work. Their clear elemental knowledge of nature can be our starting point."[4]

Rivera in his first Mexican interview on his return from Europe on July 28, 1921, said:

> The search that European artists further with such intensity ends here in Mexico, in the abundant realization of our national

4. "3 Llamamientos de orientación actual a los pintores y escultores de la nueva generación americana," *Vida Americana*, No. 1, Barcelona, May 1921.

> art. I could tell you much concerning the progress to be made by a painter, a sculptor, an artist, if he observes, analyzes, studies, Mayan, Aztec, or Toltec art, none of which falls short of any other art in my opinion.[5]

Critics concurred. José Juan Tablada, in January 1923, stated: "After a long academic sleep, the old Aztec art has inspired a national renaissance."[6] Dr. Atl in July wrote: "It appears that today the strength of the pre-Cortesian races is surging again, especially where painting is concerned."[7] Even the technique was boosted as being pre-Hispanic. *El Universal* stated: "The artist-painter Diego Rivera has rediscovered the process used by ancient Mexicans to produce their splendid frescoes, such as those we admire today in the monuments of San Juan Teotihuacán."[8]

Conservatives used the very same point to ridicule the mural movement. An editorial in *El Demócrata* poked fun at "equivocal pigments à la mode Teotihuacana."[9] Rivera, having said that murals should tell a story, was reproved by the same paper: "A painter likens painting to writing. If this definition held, we should regress further than the Italian primitives, as far back as the primitive Aztecs who told their history in hieroglyphs."[10]

At least one painter, José Clemente Orozco, turned a cold shoulder on Indianism, both political and artistic. A newspaperman suggested in 1926 "Diego is deemed the painter of our race." Orozco objected:

> What he does by putting a profusion of Indians in his pictures is to make hay while the Indian smallpox rages, a disease that is making our politicians itch.... As art for export it is understandable, but there is no excuse for painting it in Mexico.... I follow the tendencies of Diego Rivera? I would rather do it first hand, contact the original sources in the National Mu-

5. Quoted by Roberto Barrios, "Diego Rivera, pintor," *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 28, 1921.
6. "Mexican Painting Today," *International Studio*, Jan. 1923.
7. "Renacimiento artístico?" *El Universal*, July 13, 1923.
8. "Diego Rivera descubre un secreto de los Mexicanos," *El Universal*, June 19, 1923.
9. *El Demócrata*, July 2, 1923.
10. "Pintura de caballete y pintura de pulquería," editorial in *El Demócrata*, July 20, 1923.

> seum, the codices and other remains of aboriginal art that Rivera reproduces.[11]

How far do the works themselves uphold the contentions of the painters and the opinions held by friends and foes alike? First in date, even though they are not murals, are the pictures that Carlos Mérida painted about 1919. They put the heraldic colors and unbroken outline found in codices to new creative uses. Then came Rivera, who showed great understanding in his 1923 kneeling figures, often women seen from the back, where legs and arms press close to the ovaloid of the torso, with an economy of shape that suggests a carving out of a glacier-smoothed matrix.

Of the giants that Siqueiros left unfinished in the small staircase of the Preparatoria, Rivera justly wrote that they were "the most successful synthesis of the race arrived at since pre-Hispanic times."[12] Paradoxically, Orozco realized another masterly fusion of ancient and present plastics and emotions in the Indian squatting before a blood-soaked *teocalli,* frescoed in 1926, in the main staircase of the Preparatoria. It was in the same year and in the same place that he blasted Indianism.

The assumption proved popular that here was the resurrection of Indian culture, with its literary and romantic implications. As early as 1919, opening the Carlos Mérida show in Quetzaltenango, Yela Gunther wrote:

> The writhing body of the Morning Star, of turquoise panached with emerald plumes ... was reflected into the deep mirror held by the kilted Goddess, whose blue skirt became embossed with gold as the Sun (having ceased to light the mansion of the dead) ascended to its yellow palace... this Great Star confronted its own reflection in three gold disks laid on a field of crumbling, rotting stones, an attempt at the legendary ritual of irradiation missing from the deserted temples of Aztecs, Mayans and Incas for over four centuries ... One saw two snakes join heads that

11. Quoted by Miguel Bueno, "El Arte de Diego Rivera atacado por el genial artista C. Orozco," *El Imparcial,* Nov. 22, 1926.

12. "Diego de Rivera discute su extraño arte pictórico," *El Demócrata,* March 2, 1924.

> held between their fangs the recognizable mask of a god; one knows that, in the land beloved of the Sun, not a day lacked its fire offering held in a censer bewitched with copal.[13]

This text switching from culture to cult, was a model for subsequent commentators. Seven years later, D. H. Lawrence, in *The Plumed Serpent*, invented as a fit consummation of the revolution the devout promenading of idols raised on the shoulders of the Indian faithful, around the shores of Lake Chapala.

13. "Disertación," in the catalogue "*Exposición Carlos Mérida*, patrocinada por el 'Diario de los altos'. Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, en sus oficinas," 1919.

CHAPTER 2

Colonial Roots

Three hundred years of Spanish rule should not be lightly dismissed in a cultural portrait of the Mexican nation. The contrast between Indian and Spaniard has often been emphasized, but there also exists a true affinity.

It is not present-day Spain that Mexico met with, nor even the buttery physiognomies of Goya's grandees, but the beak-nosed, helmeted Spain of the conquistadors, twin to the proud profile of an Aztec eagle-knight. Amerindian and European, when they were not hacking each other to bits, enjoyed the traits they had in common. Kidnaped Montezuma played elaborately polite checker games with Cortez, whose lawyerlike tactics precisely matched the bland complexity of the imperial mind.

Affinities between pre-Colombian and colonial arts are as true as are the more obvious contrasts. The evolution of codices from pre- to post-Spanish shows the native illuminators, the *tlacuiloque*, sliding unaware from hieroglyph to *santo*, from the cubistic line and stenciled color of the Zouche codex, informed with a logic of drill and drumbeat, to the suave chiaroscuro of the "divine" Morales, and from there to Murillo. (See Fig. 1c)

The aesthetic traffic went both ways. Franciscans soon found that, to reach the native, it was imperative that they learn his language and his writing, which was also his art. Born in Mexico and probably a mestizo, Fray Diego Valadez in the sixteenth century engraved didactic plates that stand halfway between the Aztec hieroglyphs and the symbolical theological tableaux that were then the fashion in Europe. If a church was being planned and built, in its translation

from paper to stone, things would happen as a corollary of the working habits of the Indian stonecutter and, more often than not, of Indian modes of thought.

From god to God, plastic affinities eased the religious transition. The divine masks of each were marred and maimed, the one with smears of theogonical grease paint and tattoos, the Other with thorn wounds and dribbles of blood. Blood cascades down the steep steps of the teocalli. Blood brims into the chalice of the Mass. The flayed human face that fits, glovelike, over the face of god Xippe introduced the Indian devout to the pitiful Countenance printed on Veronica's kerchief.

For searching souls there must even have been spiritual affinities. Otherwise how could Juan Diego, grown to manhood in the shade of Tinonantzin's shrine, step effortlessly into the ranks of Catholic sainthood, burdened with the roses flung by Our Lady?

The religious impulse of colonial times bred two genres that served its two facets. Just as a devout kneels unseen and unburdens his soul in solitude, so ex-votos are a private prayer in paint. They live their span in the dark corners of chapels where aesthetes never congregate, but where the faithful, taking the little pictures for granted, look straight to the altar. No other collector but God is expected to hoard and enjoy ex-votos. But parishioners will at other times crowd into church to see the pomp and hear the blast of liturgical rites. These ceremonies correspond to an extrovert art that certifies the celestial round trip. In the small ex-votos, man whispers to God. From altarpieces, walls, niches, and cupolas, God thunders back his blessings to man.

The blanket category "religious subject matter" covers in Mexico more than the piggy-pink, goody-godly personages that masquerade as saints in the religious art of most countries. A sublayer of Aztec ritual bloodletting plus a layer of Spanish asceticism do not build up to squeamish prettiness. Coming late, the saint had to prove his mettle at least as impressively as had the pagan zealot. If the latter threaded a knotted rope through his tongue in guise of a prayer, the newcomer had to go him one better to earn his welcome.

Souls sizzling in purgatory, with a pope or a cardinal thrown in for good measure, windlasses unrolling the guts of martyrs, eyes or breasts served on a plate, Christ after flagellation, skinned to the ribs, bleeding on all fours in his cell like a wounded animal in its lair —such are still favorite devotions and popular sights in Mexican churches (Fig. 2a). Colonial sculpture preaches to the congregation. Its force is centrifugal, radiating from the implied heart and soul of the effigy through extensions of contorted limbs, up to the very tips of the eloquent fingers, into space.

To know such sculpture through tactile tests would be no more of an aesthetic experience than to frisk a window dummy. Statues are gessoed, lacquered, or painted, with eyelashes and wigs made of true hair, teeth and ribs of human bone. They are often beribboned and dressed in damasks and velvets, their wooden feet shod in silver. Some of the sculptors, still unsatisfied by the static limitations of their materials, dabbled in cinematography. The wooden skull of the santo was emptied, the orbits gouged out; and eyes on ball bearings, as impressive as doll's eyes, bulged and rolled in mystic agonies, moved from behind the scenes by a discreet tug at hidden strings. The man who is a purist in concerns of technique can feel only indignation at such license, but one may also admire the strength of an impulse that cleansed such bastard means, and of an art that overruled the rules of good taste in its desire to stir, to expostulate, and to convert.

The rules of direct carving and respect for the material, paramount in Aztec sculpture, meant nothing to the joiner of saints who glued together the most dissimilar and incompatible materials if he felt it could clinch one more point in the plastic argument.

Early churches were built not only for devotion but also for defense. They were holy fortresses with sparse slit openings. Thick walls guaranteed protection from the outside, and inside were unbroken expanses that invited frescoes. For most parishioners, picture writing was the one form of communication they had been taught to read; and for the friars painting and sculpture proved in the end a medium easier to control than the asperities and involutions of the many Indian tongues.

Sixteenth-century Actopán is a massive stone fortress, daubed outside with Matisse pink, where the complex needs of a religious group were catered to with a functional efficiency as strict as that of a Le Corbusier. From latrines to giant chimney to dovecot, from the vast dining room, its lectern and staircase hidden in the wall with space-saving ingenuity, such care spreads to the many tiny rooms with small windows, seat and footrest carved in the thickness of the sill, where the monastic body divided into its human cells.

Architectural nudism, satisfying in a Le Corbusier "machine for living," would not suffice for the needs of Actopán, whose function is also to generate holiness. The "machine for praying" proves as efficient as the other. In the nave, space is herded into a vertical ascent bound to contact heaven; in the deambulatories the low-lying ovals and lozenges of the bay windows frame the surrounding mountains into horizontals as soothing as a calm sea. The main cog of this spiritual generator are the sixteenth-century murals, the tender inner lining of the massive stone complex. The barrel vault of the corridors on which the cells open is covered with an imitation web of gray cross ribs, tied by medallions of cherub heads, gray with rouged cheeks. In each cell a painted frieze divides the wall at mid-height; on a black background are reserve silhouettes of naked *putti* who ride dolphins that taper into acanthus leaves, monsters of a toothy countenance not unlike that of pre-Hispanic plumed serpents (Fig. 2b). Four angels stand at the four corners of a ceiling, with light Botticellesque drapes, raised arms holding cordons tied to a center monogram framed in a rich wreath. The door jambs of the same room show Saint Peter and Saint Paul like upright river gods, with rivulets of lines for beards.

Under a vaulted ceiling, faking black and white stonework, its ribs held by vermilion rosettes, is the staircase well. There, layers of acanthus leaves, interlarded with children and chimeras, separate strata of monks, doctors, and bishops framed by theories of arches that repeat in illusion the rhythm of the nearby patio. Drawn with a line of oriental delicacy, the holy men pray, write, and meditate among the drunken geometries of embossed stone walls and brickwork floors in slanting perspectives, sit on stools, and work at tables paint-

ed as solid blocks of doubtful plumb. The black and white is relieved by light washes, ochre for wood, green earth for drapes, a sky blue, a very faint terra rosa for flesh, used only once, opaque and full, on a cardinal's hat. A panel, walled in until now and the only one perfectly preserved, portrays the first prior and the two Indian nobles who furnished land and labor. The monk is in black, the Indians wrapped in white *tilmas,* one flecked with black at the edge. Behind the three kneeling figures are a hasty clump of trees and awry mountains.

A large lunette holds a landscape of rocks, honeycombed with grottos, that sprouts a mild flora of wild violets, bulrushes, and dwarf trees, suggested in quick staccato line. On this tiered stage meant as an Egyptian desert, hermits are flagellating, discussing, dying, embracing. The Divine Child strikes water out of a tree. The satyr that Saint Anthony will meet is on his way, a hoofed *cargador,* the burden on his back roped to his horns.

Only a chastized life led in communal form can explain the perfect harmony felt in sixteenth-century monasteries. There the mural painter did not intrude upon an anachronistic architecture. Most often he saw the building grow to answer the needs of his own community. He lived in one of the cells he decorated. He knelt and chanted in the chapel he frescoed, wed to his work until death.

While Actopán is beautiful because it is all of a piece, other early buildings stand out because they are plastic palimpsests whose successive layers of art, though clashing in style, also tell an engrossing tale. The parish of Tlatelolco is of the earliest in the Americas. Montezuma escorted Cortez to this populous outskirt of his capital to see the teocalli sacred to Huitzilopochtli, god of war. A few years later, the Spanish victor replaced the temple with another, dedicated to his military guardian angel, Señor Santiago.

As early as 1531, before the Virgin of Guadalupe upset his pious routine, Juan Diego often trekked from his village of Toltetlac to Santiago Tlatelolco, to pray. A decade later, harassed Father Motolinia wrote: "The Mass for the Indians is jammed everyday. As early as the doors be open there they are waiting. Needing no clothing or shaving to speak of, they file toward the church at the first ray of dawn."

Anyone who looks at Saint Christopher will not die a sudden death that day—hence the cautious custom of painting the saint close to the door of the medieval church, so that devout eyes may not miss him. The preventive icon came to America, a pebble in the weighty structure of the Catholic Church that was carried on the back of that other Christopher, Columbus, as he waded through the Atlantic Ocean. Santiago Tlatelolco has its Saint Christopher, a rough-hewn giant, pyramidal as the neighboring teocalli, tapering from gnarled legs of knotted oak through a Roman armor fringed with leather tongues, to a small gentle bearded head, shrunk in scale and in mood to meet the scale and mood of his childish Burden (Fig. 4).

The present church was completed in 1610, the earliest and most probable date for the painting of this mural, but its stylistic roots may go back further still. A graphic origin is suggested by the palette of grays and blacks, barely relieved with earth color. Its prototype may have been a fifteenth-century German xylograph that crossed the ocean glued to the inner lid of a sailor's chest, or a sixteenth-century Renaissance illustration in a monastic tome. By all rules of sane knowledge, primitivism should precede in time the elaborateness of the High Renaissance, which suggests a rude woodcut blown to mural scale by an artist conscious of Italy. But in Mexico it may also mean the reflection of a Titian translated in terms of provincial naïveté.

An inscription at the foot of the panel states that "this image was restored and the whole church whitewashed in and out ... the year of 1763." It must have already been a very old and venerated effigy to be spared, though its barbaric clumsiness sits heavy over the floral decorations stenciled at that time. The eighteenth century was not conspicuous for its respect for earlier art forms, and the restorer spared no effort to bring the old santo up-to-date; he refreshed the leonine mane of the giant with curls, and caressed the Child with a brush dipped in aesthetic sugar. Paradoxically, a medley of styles and a diversity of hands over a span of centuries resulted here in great art.

The Saint Christopher of Tlatelolco remains a clue to the rough-

ness of pioneer beginnings. Actopán illustrates the sturdy complexity of early monastic life. But many another contrasting facet of Mexican devotion is expressed in murals. Only the eighteenth century could have devised such a precious theological boudoir as that of the sanctuary of Atotonilco, where the Virgin of the Rosary rested between holy chores. The tiny doll-like Madonna with pink-lacquered cheeks and jeweled tiara owned an elaborate wardrobe of damask and gold braid that answered the changes of season and the many social requirements of out-of-door processions and visits to neighboring communities to ensure rains and crops, with the best robe earmarked to attend as hostess the many images that paid return calls. Her religious alcove, hollowed with niches and *œil-de-bœuf* windows, capped by a minuscule dome, gay and cosy as a hope chest, is painted all over in full color with pastoral motifs and garlands, medallions that relate the translation of the House of Loreto (a pink toy villa rising over a toy ocean), and ditties of advice to girls on dress and decency.

The aesthetic of the eighteenth century eased imperceptibly into that of the nineteenth. Francisco Eduardo de Tresguerras in Mexico, like his contemporary Goya in Europe, was the man to link both centuries. In the white and gold church of El Carmen of Celaya, which he planned and decorated single-handedly, the neo-classical orders are used with a buoyancy worthy of the rococo *rocailles*. Austere pediments, architraves, metopes, and triglyphs combine astonishingly to express pure joy. Playful angels, roughly chiseled, perch on cushioned clouds that settle on fluted columns like foam on steins of beer. Already both architect and sculptor, Tresguerras turned painter to fill scalloped *trumeaux* with vapors and childish forms, baby angels adoring the Holy Baby. Equally dimpled grown-ups smile to God, receive stigmatas, or fly in golden chariots pulled by horses as mild as poodles. Light and shade create spherical volumes and also dissolve them in gray-blue mist to mark distance, while the rust-brown foregrounds are pegged in place by the suave pink and blue of carpentered drapes.

Tresguerras also painted the walls of a side chapel, finished in 1811. The technique he used was fresco secco, a kind of lime tempera.

Death is the leitmotiv, one known to all periods of Mexican art. Skulls are as familiar to Aztec décor as the egg and dart to the Greek. The colonial saint fondles a skull for succor; and to this day, on the Day of the Dead, children pull the strings of puppet skeletons and gleefully get sick eating sugar skulls.

In Tresguerras' chapel the top lunettes feature skulls in sienna monochromes that, bulblike, sprout elaborate curlicues. The dado is honeycombed with columbarium niches, each with its skull and bones turning to sod in the spatial void. Between top skulls and bottom bones are three panels on funereal motifs: Left of the altar is the "Raising of Lazarus," the gray flesh shrouded in white. Spectators kneel, doubt, or adore, one merely sniffing at death. The backdrop is not unlike a Pompeian landscape, with rock formations, the mouth of the sepulcher, and distant buildings. At the right Tobias buries the dead. Graves and corpses are strewn at the feet of the bearded patriarch, vast in the blown folds of a Naples yellow mantle. He leans against the ruled verticals of a fluted column which is the advance sentinel of an all-stone landscape dreamed of by a builder. Walls, monuments, pyramids, obelisks are garnished with clumps of dark-blue foliage fading to gray-blue as it recedes. The largest panel, that of "The Last Judgment," gives its name to the chapel, La Capilla del Juicio. All celestial doings are in a light key proper to the chalky values of the medium. A God the Father, bent upon the earth's actions, is attended by an interceding Mary in pink, and by cherubs dappled like so many cloud puffs. On earth the dead are rising, the blessed with naked bodies in creamy lights and flesh-pink shades. The damned, with screaming open mouths, are a crawling mess of livid tones, given the pitch by a gamy-blue devil complete with bat wings, horns, and fork. Sandwiched between the blessed and the damned, and joining neither as yet, a skeleton pushes open the stone lid of his tomb. It must be an x-ray self-portrait of Tresguerras himself, since the grave is identified by his initials.

My first view of the chapel was during services, when it was filled with a congregation of ancients shrouded in *sarapes* the color and texture of burros, marked with the *V* brand of chocolate-hued scapulars. As proof of the functional efficiency of murals that refuse

to this day to be mere tourist fare, the dado of skulls and bones shows the wear of over a century of daily friction with illiterate and image-hungry bodies.

The artist is buried in another of his Celaya churches, that of the Tercer Orden. The walls of his funeral chapel are hung with humble personal mementos, poems written as ex-votos, wax dolls arranged in pious tableaux, an unstuck mirror that reveals, glued to the frame, patches of scrap paper which are his own discarded architectural drafts. The vault itself is covered with loose planks, not with the tombstone Tresguerras had hoped for in paint.

The colonial style lingered for decades after Mexico had become a nation. Its last chapter was written in mid-nineteenth century just before Díaz clamped his white-gloved fist on the lid of Mexican art. It concerns the duel of murals fought between the Mexican Juan Cordero and the Catalan Pelegrín Clavé.

Mid-century conventions made it imperative to import the director of the Academy of Fine Arts from Europe. Clavé was the incumbent when young Cordero returned from his studies in Italy with a juvenile masterpiece, "The Redeemer and the Woman Taken in Adultery." Shown at the Academy in 1854, it earned him what publicity was to be had before headlines were invented. As a result, he was offered the subdirectorship of the fine arts school. Unwilling to take second place, Cordero refused the post in a letter in which Mexicanism runs high: "I must admit that I did not sacrifice the best years of my life in foreign countries... to come back to my own *patria* to serve under Señor Pelegrín Clavé."[1]

His proud statement began a feud with the powerfully entrenched Spaniard that lasted a lifetime. Lost to a bureaucratic career, Cordero turned to mural painting. While his contemporaries praised his decorations in oil as superior to his temperas, present taste has reversed the judgment.

Put directly on the wall, on enormous areas of church domes and pendentives, his tempera medium resembles the common glue distemper of stage painting more than it does the delicate egg tempera of the primitives. Its state of preservation after close to a century

1. Quoted by Manuel G. Revilla, *Obras*, 1 (Mexico, 1908), 260.

suggests that Cordero used a formula of his own, but glue may well be at its base. This tough medium suited admirably a blunt style suggestive of that of a sign painter. His taste was poles apart from the genteel taste of Clavé, called *papilloné*, a term suggesting swarms of butterflies in flight.

The Church of Santa Teresa is Cordero's masterpiece, finished in 1857. Raised on a ring of stones, deeply honeycombed after the pattern of the Roman Pantheon, the painted dome gives the illusion of more robustness and weight than its huge frame actually has. From its zenith, against the giant omelette of an egg-yellow dawn, God the Father swoops down, swaddled in Mars-violet drapes. Seated around the ledge of the circumference are cardinal and theological Virtues, giantesses transformed by the ceiling perspective and the epic strength of the brush into heaps of granitehard draperies. Unflagging chromas and contrasts make even an eye keyed to Matisse and Picasso wince. The pin-headed colossi cradle holy Attributes, in their fleshy arms: an anchor, a cross, a palm, accessories carpentered for just such a celestial opera. Harsh to accept even in our day, this dome eternizes a unique moment of exaltation, when the young man felt himself more than a king, alone on his high scaffold.

Clavé's friends did their best to minimize his achievement. They seized on the fact that tempera lacks the polished appearance of oil and, on the strength of style and medium, convicted the décor for its coarseness. This loaded critical estimate found favor with a public whose adverse opinion cowed Cordero into accepting 3,000 pesos less than the contracted price.

His second tempera decoration, the dome of San Fernando, is an attempted *mea culpa* for having soared so high in that of Santa Teresa; but it was not as disarming as the artist had hoped. The Immaculate Conception, oyster gray in a dark-blue mantle, ascends a heaven changing from golden ochre to a kind of bluing blue, passing by a shade of flesh. A ring-around-a-rosy of rose cherubs encircles the shaft of the lantern, sporting green, red, and purple panties. Adolescent angelic musicians fill the dome, plucking harps, blowing trumpets, tickling cellos; others raise banners and display mottoes. Either their tunics are painted all of a piece out

of a single pot of paint, or they have theatrical sheens: a leaf green warms up to salmon pink; a magenta turns Nattier blue.

San Fernando had more success than Santa Teresa. *El Diario de Avisos* of July 13, 1860, admitted that: "Courage is needed to solve problems in this style... This method must be connected with a type of nerve and energy that is both incisive and aggressive."[2] Cordero's accomplishments and near-success proved too much for Clavé, who had counted up to then on his directorship as the best means of supremacy. He rolled up his pedagogical sleeves and, with a phalanx of art students, started in 1861 to decorate in oil the dome of the Church of La Profesa.

He divided the semisphere into eight segments, allotting one to each of the seven Sacraments, with one to spare. Soon after he began, the reform laws of Juárez disbanded monastic congregations, federal troops invaded the premises, and all work stopped. It was resumed under Maximilian and finished in the besieged capital of the tottering Empire, while Juárez-aimed bullets whizzed by the uprights of the scaffold. The dome was uncovered in 1867 to a distracted Republic. Now the critics friendly to Cordero had their turn. They belittled the work, saying that it destroyed the unity of the architecture, lacked the autography of a master's hand, and resorted to the medium of oil as being easier than tempera. Having fulfilled all the years of his contract, Clavé returned to Spain, and Cordero brushed the last stroke in this pictorial duel with another mural, "Triumph of Science and Study over Ignorance and Sloth," treated at length in Chapter 9.

Cordero bridged the gap in time between colonial and modern, and helped to keep nineteenth-century Mexico mural-conscious. The art critic López-López, Cordero's friend since childhood, wrote in 1874:

> recommending to the good taste and culture of the administration the convenient beautification of public buildings with mural paintings ... The schools of medicine, law, mining, agriculture and commerce... the palaces of the government and of

2. "Varios Mexicanos," "Variedades: El Convento de San Fernando y las pinturas de un artista mexicano."

> justice, the city halls, and other buildings that house the administrative sovereignty, all need distinctive marks and wait for the brush and chisel of Mexican artists dedicated to the study of the fine arts, so that such places be spared the trite appearance of private dwellings.[3]

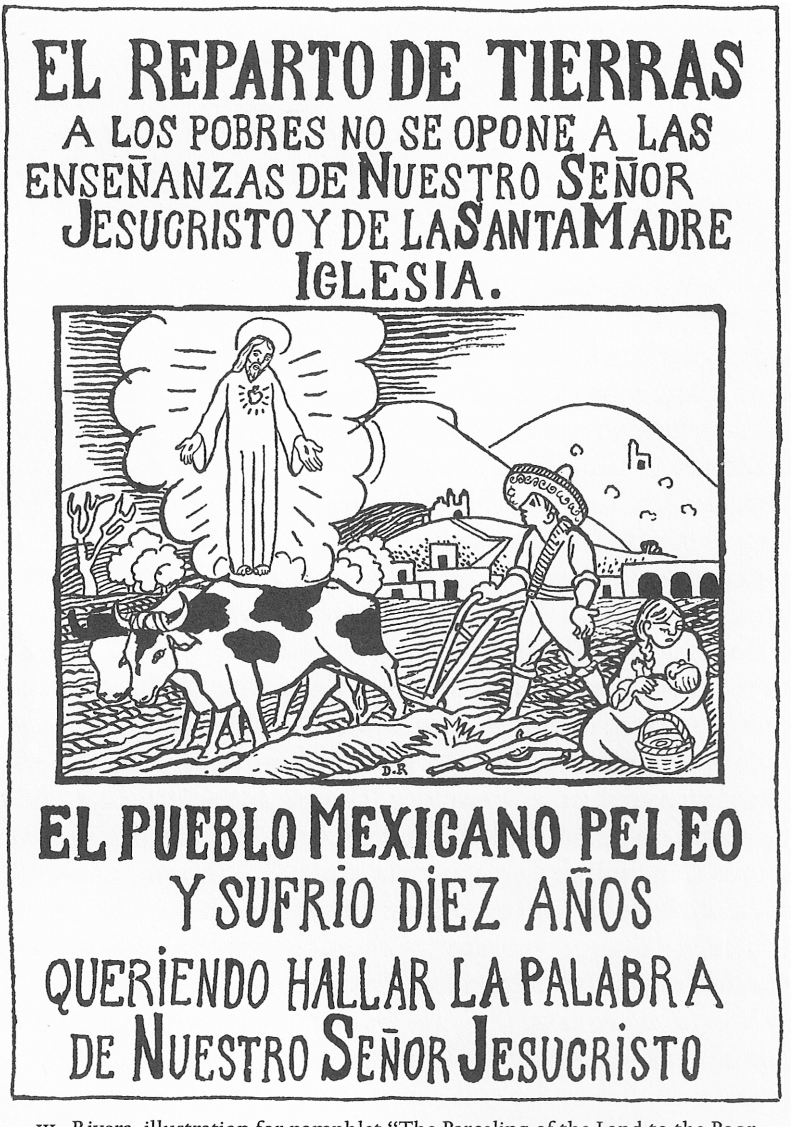
The prophecy is now fulfilled. López-López' future is our present.

The dual magnetic tensions that still crackle under Mexican cultural unity went adrift in the 1910 revolution. The Indian element "went native," while the Spanish Catholic, heir to Colonial times, was officially eclipsed. But the most enthusiastic persecutors of the Church had their newborn secretly baptized and their dead buried in hallowed ground, just in case.

Mexican Marxists found it difficult not to hold on to the apron strings of the Mother they kicked. Fiery Lombardo Toledano redacted a pamphlet called "The Parceling of the Land to the Poor Is Not Contrary to the Teachings of Our Lord Jesus Christ or to Those of the Holy Mother Church. The Mexican People Have Fought and Suffered Ten Years to Mind the Words of Our Lord Jesus Christ." Rivera illustrated it with an apparition of the Sacred Heart to a peasant plowing a field (Text fig. 111). In his first mural Rivera painted the cardinal virtues, Justice, Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, and the theological ones, Faith, Hope, and Charity—the last as a repentant Magdalen. In an interview given in 1922, while the work was under way, he confessed: "This is nothing more than a big ex-voto."[4] In the entrance hall of the Preparatoria School the apotheosis of the Virgin of Guadalupe by Revueltas faces "The Erection of the Cross in the New World" by Alva de la Canal, both dated 1923 and stamped with the hammer and sickle of the Syndicate for signature! That same year Siqueiros planted in the small staircase of the same school a Saint

3. "Pintura al temple ejecutada por el distinguido artista Juan Cordero en el cuadro mural de la meseta superior que da paso a los corredores principales de la Escuela Nacional Preparatoria," *El Federalista*, no. 1347; reprinted in *Poesias y Discursos leidos en la festividad en que la Escuela Nacional Preparatoria laureando al eminente artista Don Juan Cordero le dio un testimonio público de gratitud y admiración, por el cuadro mural con que ha embellecido su edificio*, Mexico, 1874.

4. Quoted by Juan del Sena, "Diego Rivera en el Anfiteatro de la Preparatoria," *El Universal Ilustrado*, April 6, 1922.



III. Rivera, illustration for pamphlet "The Parceling of the Land to the Poor Is Not Contrary to the Teachings of Our Lord Jesus Christ or to Those of the Holy Mother Church," ca. 1922.

Christopher as a reminder of the Conquest, and in the main staircase Orozco spread his magnificent series on Saint Francis of Assisi.

These astonishing departures from orthodox radicalism are proof of the spell that colonial decorations cast over the painters. In search of mural precedents, we would travel in a group to Acolman, Tepozotlan, and other colonial shrines. If we had the strength and the cash, we hired a bus for our cultural jamboree, and we were so noisy that onlookers guessed we were revolutionary generals on a spree rather than artists digging for aesthetic roots. A good peasant who invited himself in midway on one of our rides thought that his last moment had come as pistols were flung out of holsters and a rabbit shoot begun without slackening the pace of the bus. As Rivera, at one lucky try, tumbled a hare on the go, whose flight ended in a headfirst cartwheel, our frightened guest, before he could be stopped, was doing the same out of our speeding bus.

Where Aztec art had failed us in our program of plastic propaganda, colonial art shone as a supreme model. The self-contained, self-sufficient Indian form could not help us paint murals that talked to the people. On the contrary, colonial fresco was synonymous with plastic elocution. It solved the problems of preaching from walls and ceilings that were also our problems. Its voice rose splendidly in its oratorical flights, but it was also careful to enunciate clearly so that the simplest soul could understand its directions.

Colonial art was braver than ours. Whereas we skittered in a dilemma between pure form and pragmatic purpose, hoping somehow to save both, the colonial artist rode firmly to function. For him it was axiomatic that whatever is sculptured or painted must be of use to the people, and he employed even the most hazardous means to assure its maximum efficiency.

CHAPTER 3

Popular Roots

Pre-Hispanic and colonial traditions meet and fuse on contemporary terms in the popular arts. This humble overlap, neither Spanish nor Indian, is a third source of Mexico's modern plastic language.

Folk art is most readily accessible in curio shops and open air *puestos*. Vivid colors, amusing shapes, and amoebic prizes excite the traveler, who returns to his hotel hugging a painted pig. Only the fringe of folk art products, however, reaches the tourist market. Its creators, the people, are also its consumers. The alleged recreational quality of all such objects is hardly endorsed by the native artist. Art means the anguish of creation for the Mexican maker, as it does the world over. Dr. Atl gives us this pen sketch of the potter Zacarías Jimón:

> Ascetic, with large bones, strong hands, and jutting jaw, with a wide mouth and features that express continuous concentration. He tells me: "I paint because there is something inside me that makes me produce in travail... My one wish is that I could give away the pots I decorate instead of selling them. One's hands are tied when a piece is commissioned. This thing that is a painting should remain a thing meant for one only, so that whoever likes what has been done may carry it away free."[1]

The purpose of such art may be as serious an affair as the making of it. Amusing by our standards, a rag doll or clay statuette may in the eyes of the initiated be an awesome instrument of death by

1. *Las Artes populares en México*, 1 (Mexico, "Cultura," 1922), 176.

witchcraft. Comical in our estimate, a mask may be meant by its wearer as a stilt to narrow the vertical gap between the devout and God. A Posada print, which a museum curator appreciates cautiously, has sharpened machetes and cocked pistols for action.

Art as the Mexican understands it pervades all activities of daily life. Even though paintings by the old masters found their way to Mexico, it was usually as grants to churches from the Spanish crown. They remained functional in terms of devotion and were enjoyed communally. In the Mexico of the 1920s the concept of a fine arts market was still meaningless in terms of a Fifty-Seventh Street of velvet-lined displays. Yet art was everywhere: devotees bribed saints with ex-votos, lovers melted the hearts of their beloveds with portraits, artisans and merchants hired the painter to beautify their shops with murals and thus increase business. Sculpture existed for specialized aims—dark pieces, idols of secret worship, semblances used for black magic; innocent pieces, those marvelous toys worth a few cents, beautiful as Han tomb figures. The output was so varied as to be unclassifiable, so cheap as to be despised, so close to all, so thrust under everyone's eyes as to become invisible. The aesthetic instinct, perhaps the prime mover of the Mexican, who has but a weak instinct for economics, forbids the concept of art as a luxury and replaces it by the concept of art as a subjective commodity.

As the Mexican makes contact with an art object, he has an inner aesthetic experience. José Vasconcelos in his early twenties wrote the first draft of what later became a philosophical system, unaware that such a postulate did not apply to all men as it did specifically to his countrymen: "As I look with loving insight at the core of the object, I conceive of it as a function of beauty; its atomic equilibrium shifts. A chunk of machinery is metamorphosed into a rhythm of jubilation."[2]

Dr. Atl, observing the behavior of the shoppers at the open markets, corroborates the philosophical premise: "When womenfolk choose a pot or a casserole they are guided by taste rather than by

2. *Ulises Criollo* (Mexico, Botas, 1935), p. 292.

necessity ... They disdain the sounder wares that are thoroughly fired, because they find them too brown. Many a woman, when offered such a one, well-fired and deep in hue, says, 'No, not this one. Dark am I and dark the pot, what a pretty pair!' "[3]

Walter Pach gives another illustration, taken this time from the painters' inner circle:

> "Look what I bought today," said Don D., pulling out a 45-caliber revolver and offering it for the inspection of his young wife. "Oh, how pretty!" was the delighted comment. And it did not leap forth so spontaneously from the charming lady because of the business ability of that raw shooting-iron; it was because of the clean, logical surfaces, the strong, elegant lines, the really architectural quality of the thing.[4]

Thus the Mexican needs no specialized object for an experience of aesthetic delight. Much folk art that may not pass the test of a dealer or museum remains, nevertheless, a generator of beauty.

A feminine delicacy, noticeable in certain products of pre-Hispanic art, exists also in folk arts. The brown hand, small-boned and exquisitely nerved, succeeds where the white one would fail. Miniature furniture, minute crockery, clothed fleas obey the same instinct for smallness as do those archaic crowds of folk one inch high that make music, hold hands, give birth, delouse each other's hair, yet remain pellets of clay stamped with the functional thumb mark of the potter. Paint is as daintily put on ollas, penny banks, and kites as it was on Mayan codices; and modern post cards with bird-shaped feathers stuck to a black ground are heir to the ancient luxurious craft of the plume mosaicist who wrought the paraphernalia of imperial necklaces, shields, and quetzal headdresses.

Anonymity veils the origin of much folk art and allows the aesthete to make much of the product and little of the producer. Producers ourselves, we attempted to lift the veil, and went to sources as we had done with colonial murals. In Tlaquepaque we visited the seat of the Panduro dynasty, who for more than a hundred years

3. *Artes populares*, 1, 56.
4. *Ananias or the False Artist*, New York, Harper & Bros., 1928.

have modeled and polychromed anonymous statuettes of street and country types, women squatting at their *metates,* women cooking tortillas, *pulqueros* sucking out the sap of the maguey, *charros* on horseback lassoing calves or racing bulls, charros afoot dancing a *jarabe* with their spangled *chinas,* cargadores bent under tiers of chicken crates, *arrieros* loading mules with wine skins, all of Mexico's presidents, emperors, dictators, and their ladies, from Iturbide to Obregón. Very brown, dressed in immaculate white, Panduro VII knelt on a floor of beaten earth in front of a gob of black *tapatio* clay, lean fingers feeling the shape with tactile insight, ready to add another picturesque being to this already immense homemade universe (Fig. 5).

In Tonalá we visited Amado Galván, the master potter and decorator. He was humble, quiet, most polite, but had the impatience of the inspired artist who wishes to be left alone with his work and his vision. He let Edward Weston photograph his clay-encrusted hand spanking a spherical pot, newborn out of wet clay, and allowed Rivera to sketch him painting, all five fingers wrapped around the brush held vertically, Chinese-like, Aztec-like as recorded in codices. Diego based the Galván portrait, frescoed in the first court of the Ministry of Education, on sketches made that day.

León Venado, a sarape maker from Texcoco, came to the city to take advantage of the tourist market, arranged his primitive loom in the rented entrance of an apartment house, and started weaving. Soon he was the painters' friend, exchanged drawings with them, would sit, in the evenings, on a bed with his guitar on his knees and improvise *corridos* keyed to melancholy. In severe Indian taste, his sarapes displayed a splendid range of grays sharpened by a ground of velvet black shot with the lightning of white streaks. To Anglo-Saxon customers insisting on more "Mexican" chromas, he allowed only a small quota of imported aniline dyes. Returned to his pueblo and civilization, he gave vent to his ennui by painting water colors with picturesque subject matter, as did his city friends, but from a reversed point of view. The one I own is of a German botanist resting in the grass after an exhausting pursuit of cacti; green sunglasses, green tweeds, green felt hat, a green tin box, the badge of his avoca-

tion, are set off by a red beard and a red tie. Perhaps innocently, the artist mistook a knotted alpenstock for a monkey tail, poised to curl around a tree.

In folk art the muralists admired the human fineness of Panduro's modelings, the svelte intricacy of Galván's decorations, Venado's abstract weaves. But of all the infinitely variegated folk products, they felt closest to the tragic spiritual intenseness of church ex-votos and the social revindications of illustrated penny sheets. Technically they envied the traditional craft of the house and sign painter whose job, like their own, was to paint murals for the people.

Retablos are painted ex-votos dedicated by the grateful recipient of a grace to the image of his devotion. They are usually small oils painted on tin, piled high against the walls of the sanctuary around the venerated image, together with other testimonials of thanksgiving, such as crutches, photographs, trusses, and those silver cutouts that represent the miraculously healed limb—leg, spleen, ear, heart, foot, eye. They run their uninterrupted course from the days of the Conquest. A sculptured one, still in place at the entrance of the Church of San Hipólito shows the Archangel Michael over a mound of Indian weapons, swords of hard wood, obsidian axes, slings, nets, bows and arrows, and the war drum, the *tonalamatl,* whose noctural beat gave many a bad night to Cortez.

The retablo blossomed naturally in colonial times, in a near theocracy, and became even more important as the War of Independence and succeeding uprisings multiplied such close escapes from death as call for painted thanks. The last revolution was its culmination, regardless of the revolution's Marxian origins. Dr. Atl, who turned the Church of the Conception over to be sacked by the people in 1915, was a disenchanted witness to the spread of the devotional retablo: "The revolutionist who fought church and clergy, by suggestion or because he did not know what he fought, remained deeply religious and deeply Catholic. After looting a church, he carried the little pictures to his barracks or his home, lighted a candle before them, offered a triduum, begged of them protection for his family."[5]

5. *Artes populares,* 2, 92.

Like the sets of medieval Mysteries, the plastic dramas of the retablos are tiered vertically. Man is a kind of deep-air animal crawling on rock bottom, his face lifted to a stratosphere where dwell the holy beings. These in turn bend over the ledge of the dense pool, in search of their faithful. The pictures record the resulting dialogues, at moments when, to the handicap of being human, was added an extra burden of accident or crime. Bloody, booted, and spurred, man is crushed under an upturned horse; green, naked, and in bed, man dies; bronzed and mustachioed, man faces a shooting squad; thrown from a window, crushed in the flanges of a water wheel, stripped by bandits in the country, jailed by judges in the city, drafted to war by day, knifed by drunks at night, man claims redress from God.

God answers man in so many disguises as to emulate single-handed the crowds of Indian cosmogonies. At times he is the blond child of Atocha, in a Fauntleroy suit, velvet hat with white plume, a beribboned shepherd's crook for a wand. Or an *ecce homo,* roped as cattle, flagellated, crowned with thorns, hair matted with sweat and beard with blood. Or the Señor of the Poison, crucified, blackskinned, his loins clothed in purple velvet spangled with gold. Or a lamb. Or a kerchief. Mary also answers each call as she is bid: as a small pink doll, stiff in pyramidal brocades heavy with dangling ex-votos, nestling in a maguey; or in widow's weeds, crushing a wet handkerchief to her teeth; or in a blue starry mantle, her beige skin green against the pink of her robe, with the moon underfoot.

Each retablo is a receipted bill for spiritual goods and physical boons received, though some record less obvious gifts. One shows a bare room and a bed, and in it a dead crone very stiff; its dedication: "Señora ——— having left her village and come to town wished to die. Her family offers this picture to give thanks in her name that her wish was happily granted."

Rivera was the first to speak of retablos respectfully:

> The anguish of our people caused slowly to rise up against the walls of their churches this passing strange flowering of retablos... Unexpected comparisons come to mind—Trecento mas-

> ters and those of the dawn of the quattrocento, Henri Rousseau the custom house employee, and in certain ways the Orient and the frescoes of Chichen Itzá.... Boundless knowledge is at hand when one is endowed with purity, faith in the reality of the marvelous, love, and unselfishness.... With such motives anything becomes possible, even the symphony of colors, gyrating volumes, aerial clarity, plenitude of form bathed in a transparent milieu that, in an ex-voto of a sick mother, reminds one forcibly of the aged Renoir.[6]

Print-making in Mexico does not proceed by limited editions or foxy selling schemes. It is narrowly linked to the penny pamphlet, the rhymed corrido or the prose *relato* which it illustrates. In colonial times Mexico received such sheets from Spain, of which a sample dated 1736 exists in the National Museum. But the mestizo transformed such models, just as he had already put Spanish santos to more heathenish uses. This Mexican style came to maturity at about 1880 with Don Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, when his staff of reporters, poets, and artists published works so homogeneous in style, so beautifully attuned to race and land, as to be almost immediately classified as anonymous. Of his staff the best known by name today is José Guadalupe Posada.

In about 1900 Posada was a fat man, robed in an ample white blouse, very brown of skin, his skull fringed with sparse white hair. His workshop was tucked inside the portals of the disused carriage entrance of a private house in Santa Inez Street. His tools and plates in hand, he worked in plain sight of passers-by, housemaids on their way to market, urchins astray from grade school, and even loitering art students from the nearby San Carlos Academy,Rivera and Orozco among them. Aimed at customers for whom reading was slow work, the pictures he cut had to state the story in terms intense enough to smoke the Indian's penny out of his knotted kerchief. Horrifying, edifying, or comic anecdotes, broadsides on love and war, recipes for cooking and witchcraft, librettos of rustic plays published by Vanegas Arroyo and illustrated by Posada reached the re-

6. In *Azulejos*, 1, 1922.

motest crags of the republic in the haversack of the peddler and the saddlebag of the pilgrim.

The firm and its artist catered to the city mestizo as well as to the Indian bumpkin. Arroyo's *Street Gazette* startled the city with extras as hot as the hand-setting of type and the hand-cutting of the pictorial journalism allowed. It thrived also on perennials such as "The Man Who Eats His Own Children," "The Two-headed Stillborn," "Lovers Go to Hell on Account of a Dog," "Woman Gives Birth to Four Lizards and Three Boys." Each year, for the Day of the Dead, while children teased their appetites with sugar skulls and their elders prepared buffet suppers to be devoured on the family tomb, Arroyo's press let fly thousands of pasquinades known as *calaveras,* the Mexican Dance of Death. With high glee Posada conjured up the skeletons of politicians with tortoise-shell glasses and celluloid collars, of generals whose ribs sag under medals, of dowagers hiding their bald skulls under the funereal flowers of imported chapeaux. He reserved his tenderness for ephemeral feminine beauty.

> The Dance of the Skeletons
> of all the Women Artisans
> Hatmakers, Dressmakers
> and all Women Workers

This caption to one of his prints sings like the plebeian voice of Villon, of whom Posada, who probably never read him, is the greatest illustrator.

The revolution was rehearsed within that balding brown head, and its tableaux charted by that able brown hand before it was begun. Actually, when it came, it proved to be a Posada "still" come to life. The scenes he loved to portray—anti-Díaz meetings with bricks and bats flying, skulls smashed in, stabbings, shootings, chained prisoners hemmed in between men on horseback—what had been but lines inked on paper found true depth and true bulk. Arms, until then frozen in the delicate balance of an engraved design, let fly the stones hidden in their fists. Paper machetes became steel and dug into the "wicked rich man," easy to spot in the cowardly uniform

that Posada had devised for him, high collar and high hat, gold chain dangling on a comfortable belly soon to be eviscerated.

When Posada died in 1913, only a handful of inarticulate folk accompanied his coffin to the cemetery. In 1943 his retrospective show at the Chicago Art Institute attracted such crowds that people were trampled underfoot, and a riot squad smashed in a few hotheads before restoring the museum's respectability.

Pulquería painting, the mural painting of the people, derives its name from the Mexican saloon it most often adorned. At least in the capital, the genre has disappeared within the last twenty years, its freehand improvisation replaced by the rigid craft, made in U.S.A., of mechanical squaring and enlarging from standard chromos. It was natural that the development of the mural movement should bring increased comprehension of, and interest in, its popular counterpart. The French cubists had already discovered the house painter as the contemporary heir to centuries-old formulas and traditions, preserved and perpetuated in the streets while art academies had forgotten them. Braque and Léger, to match the perfection of professional lettering, inserted printed matter in their compositions. Picasso, having discovered the comblike tool that decorators use for graining imitation wood, purloined it to comb the flowing red beard of a French Zouave in a picture he was finishing.

In Mexico the craft went further than lettering and imitation textures. The pulquería painter tackled problems special to the mural craft—soaring perspective, optical deformations, multiple points of view, illusive architectures within a real architecture—that before him had engrossed Uccello, Francesca, Mantegna, Raphael, Veronese. Academic mural painters did not even know such problems existed.

Edward Weston, who was photographing folk art at the time, jotted down in his Mexican diary:

> Assuredly there must be a "school" of pulquería painting, for though diverse, they have the same general trend in color, effect and design. If Picasso had been in Mexico, I should feel that he must have studied the pulquería paintings, for some are

> covered with geometrical shapes in brilliant primary colors to excite the envy of a European modernist.
>
> These paintings, which include every possible subject, beautiful women, charros, toreadors, "Popo" and Ixtaccíhuatl, engines and boats, are the last word in direct realism. With the titles emblazoned over the doors, imaginative, tender, or humorous, one has in the pulquería the most fascinating interesting popular art in modern Mexico City.[7] [Fig. 6]

Of all the manifestations of folk art, pulquería paintings remained for long the most despised. Puritans damned the bacchanalian fumes of such aesthetic excesses. In truth the painter was often bribed to surpass himself with free samples of the fermented maguey sap, and some of his endeavors were brushed in a haze of improvisation. To this day, a bad painter is called "de brocha gorda," one who wields the fat square brush of the house painter, as contrasted with the fine-art painter, presumed to be an adept of the small pointed brush. Even Atl, future author of the standard book on folk art, could not refrain from the expected dig at this mistreated branch of painting. In his speech that opened the 1921 exhibition of the Fine Arts Academy he remarked: "As for students who cannot be turned into artists ... they still have a chance of earning their living as pulquería painters."[8]

Our admiration for folk muralists marked us and our work as the foes of culture. *El Demócrata,* July 20, 1923, reproached Rivera, saying:

> It seems to us that a painter graduated both from Mexico and from Europe, hailed as a master, familiar with technical secrets, commits a bizarre breach of logic ... when he considers being called "pulquería painter" an honor; he makes himself one by wishing to paint as a humble craftsman on shameful walls, instead of painting as a cultured artist on consecrated walls.[9]

Folk art influenced the whole of our production in regard to mood and social content. The subject matter of folk art is the folk,

7. "Daybook," unpublished.
8. In "La Exposición de Bellas Artes," *Excelsior,* Sept. 30, 1921.
9. "Pintura de caballete," *El Demócrata,* July 20, 1923.

and they were also the subject matter of our socially conscious murals. Folk art corrected the tendency of the fine arts painter to look at the folk from the outside and, finding them less pulchritudinous than his own, to situate them with the best of intent amid ash cans or their Mexican equivalent. The folk and their artists had a better opinion of themselves. In the bare interiors shown in the retablos, the floor of beaten earth is transformed into the rich red of brickwork; the tip of a brush conjures up necklaces and earrings which are generally in the pawnshop; the *petate* becomes a raised bed, often with dais and curtains of colonial descent that evoke the dream substance of this piece of furniture. The men wear immaculate white or brand-new overalls, the women, layers of petticoats unchanged since the eighteenth century; feet remain bare, as unhampered as those of archaic sculptures. Rags are the badge of the villain, who drains the bottle, ogles the maiden, or wields the knife.

This sweetened representation matched the round forms and clear colors that Rivera had already displayed in his Renoir period. He thus became, partly because his aesthetic lent itself to it, partly because he relished its tranquil mood, the painter of a world in which revolution has already triumphed, a utopia from which the worker has cast out the bourgeois, where sweat is unknown, where overalls are the badge of distinction, where one parades through the cleansed landscape only to contrast the red of banners to the blue of the skies. The one puzzling thing in this Marxist paradise is the religious attitude of the folk, who hold guns and machetes as if they were holy candles, and finger sickles and hammers as if they were rosaries. Such thanksgiving, somewhat incongruous in revolutionary pictures, is a reminder that the universe created by Rivera is blown to architectural size from the microcosm of the retablo.

As a lad of ten, Orozco watched Posada cutting and etching in his open workshop, filled his pockets with metal shavings, and filled his mind with the sights of a world quite distinct from that of the retablos. Posada's universe was that of the tabloid, where ham actors perform headlines to the crash of flash bulbs, wives pour lead in the ears of their sleeping husbands, husbands kill their in-laws and eat them, children are born with three legs, or two heads, or with a

leering face in lieu of a behind. Social ultimatums are shrieked by a ragged mob stoning, knifing, shaking puny fists at the ranks of straight-shooting strikebreakers. Orozco's taste for clashing lines, rasping colors, hyperdynamic doings in earthquake landscapes, *fated him to be the painter of such a universe, unredeemed by a rev-*olution or any other messiah. Orozco's world is that of the penny sheets.

In a more general way folk art taught us much in matters of mental discipline. Respectful of Paris, we were still hesitant to defy the two reigning artistic idols, originality and personality. Folk art taught us a virtue little prized by modern critics, that of humility.

CHAPTER 4

The Academy of San Carlos

The preceding survey of Mexico's artistic past implies that the murals of today, impregnated by Indian, colonial, and popular tradition, are not a freak flare-up lighted by the bonfire of a revolution. But a national style was not at all in evidence as the movement began. By 1920 decades of successful official pressure had succeeded in stifling Mexican aesthetics, or at any rate in running them underground into the subconscious. When the time came for the young revolutionaries to re-establish a link to their plastic heritage, they went through pangs of pioneering and blind progress, which have earned the movement its name of renaissance or rebirth.

Mexican art had known other ebbs and flows, particularly with regard to the founding and spasmodic continuance of an institution that has the good and evil effects of a Jekyll and Hyde—the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Carlos. Founded in 1785 to inculcate better manners in colonial artists who champed dangerously at the royal bit, it meant to lure independents to its fold with the rank of "Académico de Mérito," which entailed privileges of hidalgo, *hijo-de-algo*, son of something (Fig. 7). A trustee of the school, José Bernardo Couto, candidly admitted in 1860 that "the birth of the Academy marks ~~the~~ death of the Mexican school of painting."[1] This avowed aim fell short in practice. The persuasive Mexican milieu by turn digested or spewed out the Spaniards sent as Crown foremen to tame, curb, and chasten a tumultuous artistic herd of Creoles, Indians, and mestizos.

The second to be imported as director of painting, Don Cosme de

1. *Diálogo*, p. 89.

Acuña, whose grandee hauteur clothed a meek heart, found the Americas so disturbing that he proposed to ship the Mexican Academy and its students to Madrid. His alternative would have been suicide. His successor, Don Rafael Ximeno y Planes, who landed in 1793, thrived, however, on the tropical diet. He weathered the Independence and married and died in Mexico, adding great temperas to its proud list of murals.

Once national autonomy was attained, the Royal Academy changed its name to the hopeful one of National Academy but lost the 12,000 pesos annuity from the king of Spain that had made its operation feasible. In 1839 the Marquise de Calderón de la Barca witnessed "the present disorder, the abandoned state of the building, the nonexistence of ... classes of sculpture and painting."[2] Soon after, well-meaning Mexicans of substance tried to revert to colonial status. Money raised by means of a lottery paid for the importation of the high-salaried Pelegrín Clavé, a Catalan devotee of the German Overbeck (Fig. 8). Clavé was czar of fine arts in Mexico for thirty years. A "man who received an academic education and now a teacher in an academy," he bluntly, if blindly, added: "In Mexico I found no school of art, either good or bad."[3]

Clavé worked hard at Germanizing Mexican painting, but the best of native talent leaned more toward the French through Ingres, whose lovely "Saint John the Baptist as a Child," owned by the school, counteracted with tremulous tenderness the zinc drapes and soupy beards favored by Clavé. As Clavé's influence waned with the century, a well-meaning citizen, Don Justo Sierra, Secretary of Public Instruction, imported another Catalan painter, Don Antonio Fabres. José Juan Tablada wrote in 1923: "The Academy then settled to work actively but uselessly. Meanwhile, a few noble influences, such as that of Ingres, which used to make the ghostly rounds of the pedagogical cloisters, vanished forever. Fabres imposed his ideals, literary at bottom and photographic on the surface."[4]

Under Díaz the halls of the Academy were hung with lithographic

2. Madame C... de la B..., *Life in Mexico, during a Residence of Two Years in That Country* (London, 1843), p. 103.
3. Quoted by Couto, pp. 89–90.
4. In a foreword to Adolfo Best Maugard, *Método de dibujo*, Mexico, 1923.

charts of the Julian system, ears, noses, feet, and eyes that the beginner was bidden to duplicate neatly in charcoal. One graduated to models of geometric solids, first drawn in line, then in line with shadings added. The following step was the copying of ornaments—in low relief at first, then in high relief, lastly in the round: pedestals, vases, column shafts, cornices. Next came figure drawing, "The proportions of the human body... taken from bas-relief. Notions of anatomy, copy of extremities and other fragments of the human body from bas-reliefs. Caryatids, vases and friezes decorated with figures. The human body from plaster casts." A breath of fresh air was provided by "landscape drawing after prints and photographs."[5]

Having successfully managed such hurdles, the seasoned student entered life-drawing class. Here an elaborate stand would rotate the model or raise her to successive levels, bathed in alternating layers of diffused and reflected lights by a panoply of bulbs and screens. Each pose lasted a month, and a photographer was called in to take a picture from which the students could correct any deviations from nature in their drawings.

There was no short cut to painting: "No student may enter advanced painting courses who has not successfully completed the course in life drawing." Unlike landscape drawing, landscape painting was from nature: "The choice of subject will correspond to the degree of progress of each student, beginning with the study of rocks, followed by that of tree trunks, foliage, water; culminating toward the end of the term in the study of backgrounds."[6] So much for the debit side.

On the credit side the San Carlos Academy counts among its students or teachers, since its creation, all Mexican artists of importance, from José de Alzibar, born in the first third of the eighteenth century and one of its first Creole teachers, to Diego Rivera, who once stormed his way in and out of the directorship of the school. For a century and a half the Academy suckled young talent until it was sturdy enough to absorb an adult fare—formerly, the sights of

5. "Bases para inscripciones en la Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes," *Boletín de Instrucción Pública*, 5 (1905), 371.
6. "Pintura de paisaje," ibid., 9 (1908), 1059.

Rome; later, those of Paris. To the returning artist, it offered a job, a light teaching schedule that helped him live, and an ensured contact with the next generation.

Even at its ebb in the Díaz period, San Carlos bred painters of the scope of Orozco and Rivera. The latter speaks with respect of his teachers: Rebull, who had been a favorite with Emperor Maximilian, Félix Parra, a nineteenth-century apostle of Indianism, and the landscapist José María Velasco, who taught Rivera the spatial properties of color as contrasted with their illustrative qualities. While Rivera differentiates between true and false academism, rejecting certain teachers, Fabres for example, as unworthy,[7] Orozco loved them all and always felt grateful for the hierarchical iron rungs of discipline over which he painfully ascended to an awareness of his own mastery.

Engineer Juan Hernández Araujo based his outline of modern Mexican art, published in 1923, on the just thesis that "The political revolution begun in 1910 had transcendental repercussions on the course of the plastic arts in Mexico... and hurried the crash of the academic empire."[8] The seat of this empire was the San Carlos school, and the beginning of the crisis may be traced to the all-Mexican show that its fellows staged as a protest against the all-Spanish show imported at great expense by Díaz in 1910—to help celebrate Mexico's independence from Spain. While a government subvention of 35,000 pesos was readily earmarked for the Spanish display housed in a specially constructed building, the "Show of Works of National Art" that hung in the corridors of San Carlos limped into reality on a hard-won 3,000 pesos.[9] In it racial consciousness anticipated the creation of a truly Mexican style. Saturnino Herrán exhibited "The Legend of the Volcanoes" based on an Indian myth, and Jorge Enciso showed "Anáhuac," a life-size Indian greeting the sun.

The epochal change in the social order that tumbled Díaz, with the attendant ousting of his trusted *científicos*, found no official echo

7. "La Pintura Mexicana," *Excelsior*, March 18, 1942.

8. "El Movimiento contemporáneo de pintura en México," *El Demócrata*, Aug. 2, 1923. Juan Hernández Araujo is a nom de plume taken by Siqueiros and myself.

9. *Boletín*, 15 (1910), 710.

among the rulers of the San Carlos Academy. Though a Díaz appointee, the architect Antonio Rivas Mercado remained its director under the new regime. Quick to take action, the students went on a strike that smoldered inconclusively through the presidencies of De la Barra and Madero. Much publicized, the revolt solidly welded the fine arts to contemporary social and political adventures for the first time.

It began as a strictly intercurricular affair. In 1911 a pet hate of the students was the professor of artistic anatomy, Doctor Daniel Vergara Lope. Instead of letting them practice autopsies, as they wished, he sold them mimeographed sheets traced from the plates of Richer's *Anatomy*. This penny trade brought on the first overt act of opposition: "The students have petitioned the Director, asking that the anatomy teacher teach, instead of exploiting them by selling translations on loose sheets, after the manner of the folk songs of Vanegas Arroyo."[10] Director Rivas Mercado imprudently disregarded the plea.

In a landau dragged by white horses, whipped by liveried coachmen, democrat Francisco Madero drove into his capital in June 1911, and the students felt their revolutionary oats even more than before. The harried janitor of the Academy was kept busy gathering crops of improvised manifestos and dumping them on the director's desk. Undisciplined passion still oozes from those that have since then lain dormant in the archives of the school:

> By general agreement and unanimous vote none should attend the Anatomy class until its teacher resigns ... Long live Democracy! Down with the científicos in this school. Free suffrage. Liberty and Constitution.
>
> Mexico, July 15 of the Year of Freedoms.[11]

On July 28 the students declared the strike and demanded the immediate resignation of the director. An executive strike committee

10. *El Demócrata Mexicano* (?), April 25, 1911. From the album of clippings of Raziel Cabildo, one of the leaders of the strike. Some lack means of identification, and others the date. Lent by Siqueiros.

11. Archives of San Carlos, 1911.

visited newspaper offices and was even received by the Secretary of Fine Arts. A news photograph caught one of the delegates in action: José Clemente Orozco, already peering owlishly from behind thick glasses.[12]

The police forbade the strikers to enter the school, and instead they met and sketched in the open. Another news photograph shows a group of ten youngsters in high collars and homburgs, sitting stiffly on the grass of the Ciudadela gardens, sketch blocks propped on their knees. The corresponding caption is all sympathy:

> A WORTHY EXAMPLE—STUDENTS FROM THE ACADEMY WORK IN PUBLIC PARKS, THEIR SCHOOL HAVING LOCKED THEM OUT.
>
> Breathing an air purer than that of the Academy... young artists sketch unusual types, landscapes and sundry scenes; passers-by stop to look and to praise the facility with which all of it is transferred to paper.[13]

Representing the conservative element of the Academy, the architects remained impervious to the disturbance that wrecked painting and sculpture classes. Their point of view was given in an open letter that deplored the strike and urged that architects remain uncontaminated by the painters' prankish behavior: "Let the future Grecos beat you at the game of getting publicity, and go on working. Life will in time chastise them harshly. They will descend to the level of failure, while you will be justified."[14]

Two days later, the budding Grecos, loaded with "raw eggs, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, turnips, and even carrots,"[15] waited in ambush for the bulky director, Rivas Mercado, to descend the steps of his Mercedes at the door of the school. As he did so, they let fly! Said Siqueiros:

> Alas, some of our missiles unhappily landed on the beauteous daughter of the director, who rushed to the defense of her

12. Cabildo album, "Se Generalizó la Huelga," July 19, 1911.
13. Ibid., undated.
14. Ibid., letter signed: Porfirio de Cañedo Arguelles, Aug. 26, 1911.
15. Ibid., Aug. 28, 1911.

> maker. Our loutish action was much publicized and we landed in jail, the baptism of our militant politics.... Prison bred important acts of solidarity, the most appetizing being an anonymous gift of cake and chocolate bars to each of those who were detained.[16]

The liberal regime of Madero had failed to free the school from its conservative routine. Paradoxically, artistic freedom had to wait until the military dictatorship of Victoriano Huerta, when the painter Ramos Martínez was named director in September 1913. Though somewhat belittled by the historians of the mural movement, Ramos could hardly be overrated as a catalyzer. Once in power, he regularized the work in the open air that the San Carlos students had started accidentally when, locked out of the Academy building, they squatted, sketchbooks in hand, in city parks. The first of the open-air art schools was in rustic Santa Anita, with its *chinampas* gliding along lazy canals, where the feast of flowers is still celebrated by the weaving and wearing of crowns of poppies. Instead of in stifling rooms with glaring bulbs, Ramos bade his students work in an old patio with a chipped *azulejos* fountain. He surrounded them with Greek plaster casts and live Indian models, posed against a background of upright poplars. The whole was bathed in the untampered silver clarity of the plateau light.[17]

This unlikely sprout of hoary San Carlos, dubbed Barbizon in homage to the sylvan retreat of French landscapists, attracted an enthusiastic group to the cult of nature—Emilio García Cahero, Fernando Leal, Fermín Revueltas, Ramón Alva, David Alfaro Siqueiros, to mention only future muralists. And it was there that José Clemente Orozco's contact with impressionism made him realize that landscapes were not his vocation.

Barbizon lasted no longer than Huerta's grip on the presidential chair. Ramos was ousted before the end of 1914, but not before a phalanx of young painters sickened with academism had started on the way to recovery under his benign influence.

16. "Autobiografía," unpublished.

17. Francisco Quijano, "La Academia de Bellas Artes," *Novedades*, June 10, 1914. Illustrated with photographs of Santa Anita.

Ramos Martínez had opened the doors wide for reform, and reform came strong on his heels, a simoom of hot revolutionary winds that swept into the past the San Carlos that Rivera and Orozco had known as students. Ramos' successor, appointee of First Chief Carranza, was fierce Gerardo Murillo, painter, agitator, and vulcanologist, whose *nom de révolution* was Dr. Atl. Never has a school been ruled by a less conventional pedagogue.

Dr. Atl had absorbed art in France, Spain, Italy, and it would seem even in China, while Rivera was still in pink socks and knee pants, and Orozco a budding agricultural expert. Back in Mexico, the future director used to sit with the young students of San Carlos, who sweated to render the model with photographic pulchritude, distracting them with stories of the far-flung wonders he had witnessed. He made them aware for the first time of the freedom of the great masters; how Michelangelo created muscles instead of copying them, making them bulge or sink rhythmically as a poet manipulates sound; how form was made flesh on the ceiling of the Sistine because of an ideal that strove to be born rather than a mirror held to bodies born of women.

Dr. Atl was not content to nourish only the imagination of the students, Rivera and Orozco among them. He also understood how young appetites are bigger than Bohemian pocketbooks. To match the heroic fare that he instilled into the spirit, Atl, turned chef, invited the young painters to gargantuan meals where the one course was pails of spaghetti with meat sauce. It must have tasted good and been truly filling, for both Rivera and Orozco mention it with gratitude forty years later.

Meanwhile, as a painter in his own right, Dr. Atl shuttled between the volcano Popocatépetl and the mountain Ixtaccíhuatl, lived there as a hermit, and drew the mountains with a subtle and tough line that Rivera compared in 1926 to that of Hiroshige (Text fig. IV).[18] Atl was also the organizing spirit behind the all-Mexican show of 1910. On this occasion his young friends returned his hospitality with "A Spirited Fiesta of Artists":

18. "Pintores modernos de México," *Social*, Havana, Nov. 1926.

IV. Dr. Atl, cover of catalogue for his one-man show in Paris, 1914.

> Last Monday the exhibitors at the show of Mexican art in the Academy of San Carlos gave a grand fiesta in Xochimilco for the distinguished painter Don Gerardo Murillo ... all overflowing with gaiety and animation. Awaiting them was a punt full of flowers.... Going hither and thither, and running, and delighting in the arms of nature, their appetites sharpened.[19]

And all sat down at a long table in the open to eat something other than spaghetti. A news photograph shows them looking like a human pyramid, grateful arms lifting up the bearded and gesticulating hero, with a bashful Orozco as the strong man underneath, all tipsy and squinting in the sun.

19. *Arte y Letras*, Oct. 23, 1910.

Carranza's appointment of Dr. Atl as director of the school was justified on aesthetic grounds, but it also repaid a political debt. In 1913 Atl was in Paris at the time that Carranza's foe, Victoriano Huerta, wished to float a loan so as to fortify his somewhat precarious position in the presidential seat. In turn international financiers postulated as required security his ability to stay put on the throne; the Paris Bourse was the locale of the intrigue. To foil the usurper, Atl wrote and printed a sheet *La Révolution au Mexique* which he peddled personally at the entrance to the French stock exchange as if it were a newspaper extra. His stentorian voice barked the fake headline in the ears of financial magnate passers-by long enough to wreck the intended loan, and with it Huerta's dream of permanent power.

Atl said on his nomination:

> Being the foe of academic institutions, how can I present a plan of reform, suggest a curriculum for a setup that I judge pernicious. I find myself in this dilemma: whether to propose that the school be scrapped, or else converted into a workshop geared for production, like any industrial workshop of today, or like all art workshops of all epochs when art flowered vigorously.[20]

According to Siqueiros:

> His first gesture when named to the directorship of the School was to place at the door a placard scrawled in blue pencil that said, "Bricks are also needed to make a revolution." The slogan was unusually synthetical, and also very confusing. What had bricks to do with art? Teachers and students alike scratched their heads in despair, attempting to decipher the thought of the supreme authority who would orient the school for a while in the ways of artistic education. "Bricks are also needed to make a revolution"?
>
> The mystery did not last long. "Bricks are also needed to make a revolution" meant "The school of fine arts must trans-

20. In *Boletín*, 1 (1914), 74.

> form itself into a popular workshop, a school of arts and crafts rather than a university center."[21]

Others took the slogan at its face value, and still remember to this day how the director told them to bake their own bricks and to build up their own art schools.

Atl's passage through the directorship of the Academy was just long enough to deposit, among shelves of milder stuff stored in its archives, a thin stratum of papers—letters, carbon copies, scribbled orders—remarkable for their outspoken contents. He notified the Ministry of Public Instruction: "I will present a project of total reorganization of what some insist in calling the teaching of the Fine Arts. Naturally, I will make a thorough cleansing of teachers, classrooms, and storage rooms, given that everything in the school is thoroughly dirty."[22] To a routine circular from the Ministry of Health asking if classes of physical culture ever were included in the curriculum, he answered:

> Absurd as it is, there have never been classes of physical culture in an institution where an understanding and love of beauty is taught. Its first concern should be the cult of the human body. I can assure you that the day we have a class of physical culture in this school, its whole fabric will vanish; with order brought to the organic equilibrium of the students, they are bound to forsake the intellectual masturbation that is the only fruit ever born by academic institutions. I will reorganize this so-called School of Fine Arts, giving it a character essentially practical. For a start I will change its name to that of "workshop," where all the workers may do three things: take a bath, work, and make money.[23]

None of the threatened reforms came to pass; owing to the increased revolutionary tempo, Atl's tenure proved shorter even than that of Martínez. It ended on the harrowing night when toward

21. "Autobiografía."
22. Archives of San Carlos, 1914, folder 1, "Asuntos varios," letter dated Oct. 6, 1914.
23. Ibid., letter dated Sept. 12, 1914.

dawn, as the hoofs of Villa's feared Dorados approached the capital, his marathon oratory won the perilous allegiance of the students to Carranza. That same morning Atl took to flight, taking with him the sturdier talents of the school, mostly potential muralists. The San Carlos exiles settled in Orizaba, where corpses replaced plaster casts as models for Cahero, Alva, Orozco, and Siqueiros, as the class switched from classroom to battlefield.

With Atl gone, the exhausted school went through a period of fitful dozing until July 1920, when the selection of a new director was left to a soviet of teachers and students, and Ramos Martínez was returned to the post he had left in 1914.

His zeal for reforms matched that of his predecessor:

> Old theories have been totally discarded, blasting an unobstructed pathway for Truth.... Classes have been converted into free workshops.... Courses in composition have been cancelled... they were a major and most academic blunder... evading the only source of Truth: Nature.
>
> Open air schools have been founded... keeping them [the pupils] morning, afternoon, and night in direct communion with life itself and our customs. As a result, taste has been oriented toward our own, our NATIONALISM, with great success already to its credit.[24]

Just as he had done during his first term in the directorship, Ramos' best efforts were spent on the foundation of open air schools, successors to the pioneer "Barbizon," where pupils were kept "morning, afternoon, and night in direct communion with life itself and our customs." I was his guest for three months at the school of Coyoacán before leaving to do mural work. The ancient building had private studios, the choice of an arched patio or a magnificent alley of trees as a backdrop for models. Ramos preferred to praise rather than to criticize; he spurred his flock on with imaginative schemes, for instance nicknaming them Cézanne, Renoir, Monet, etc., a "holy patron" for each to emulate. It was truly

24. Ramos Martínez, "La Academia de Bellas Artes; su nueva orientación," *Boletín de la Universidad*, 3 (1921), 95.

a painter's paradise. Charles Michel described it in October 1922:

> A centenarian park surrounds it, a protective barrier that guarantees its calm and serenity.... Over the entrance are drawn two open arms as a kind of coat of arms that suggests the reception awaiting all comers. Along the Spanish arcades and ancient corridors of the first patio hang students' works. In sundry gardens, on terraces and stairways of lovely style, everywhere they work with concentration.... Pigments are given as freely as the advice of the master. Accessories and locale, all is free.... It is in this kind of native Villa Medici that a yeast of beauty leavens Mexico's future artistic glories.[25]

Even Rivera reluctantly yielded to Coyoacán's charm, and in 1923, while laboring to bring forth his art for the masses, wrote wistfully: "The enchanted pool of Coyoacán—its slogan, Dario's verse 'Virtue is to be calm and strong'—reflected foliage, clouds, and sparse stray faces bending over its edge."[26] And "The young artists cultivated post-impressionism in the agreeable and muted atmosphere of this sympathetic foundation ... which due to its commodiousness and segregation reminded one insistently of a sanitarium."[27]

The school's only defect was that it outlasted its day. Araujo complained in 1923 that "The School of Coyoacán, in anachronistic manner, furthers at present the lingering survival of impressionism."[28] In spite of that mistiming, the impressionism it sponsored was neither derivative nor decadent.

When General Obregón took the presidential oath at the end of 1920, the first exhibition of work done at the Fine Arts School under Martínez was a cultural highlight of the festivities. The reporter for *El Universal* remarked approvingly, "Oils and sculptures disclose that the too strict observance of the rules of art is disappearing from the Academy of Fine Arts."[29]

The second exhibition opened on September 29, 1921, with music

25. In *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*, 1 (1923), 347.
26. "De Pintura y otras cosas que no lo son," *La Falange*, Aug. 1, 1923.
27. "Dos Años," *Azulejos*, Dec. 1923.
28. "El Movimiento," IV, *El Demócrata*, Aug. 2, 1923.
29. *El Universal*, Dec. 4, 1920.

by a string quartet, and with President Obregón presiding. To mark the opening of a peaceful era, Dr. Atl, once Ramos' political foe, was the featured speaker. He praised the fact that under Ramos, "the individual tendency of the pupil asserts itself, and rarely the lethal influence of a teacher." The reporter added: "The mountaineer-painter asserted also that the School of Fine Arts had been a tomb up to now, that it is hard to do a work of art in Mexico where nobody appreciates it, that the opening of this show signalizes a dawn bound to reach full daylight."[30]

This act marked the apogee of Ramos' influence. The emphasis that the "full-fledged lover of art for art's sake"[31] put on originality and the sacredness of individualism was bound to clash with the standpoint of the muralists geared to social teamwork on communal lines and deeply conscious of an objective tradition. They were thus badly prepared to appreciate the good that Ramos had done, even to them.

As spokesman for the mural group, Araujo lashed out at the "anarchical-lyrical aesthetic," the reverse of the medal that Ramos Martínez had so proudly cast:

> As its name implies, it has no principles or theory whatsoever; it rejects the idea of organic construction of the classicists as well as their acknowledgment of a social function; it rejects also the optical obeisance paid to nature by the academicians. Its starting point is a most acute individualism; it postulates that, given a canvas of whatever size, width, and height, plus a choice of oil colors marketed by some reputable firm, one is in condition to produce works of art monumental in scope.[32]

And again: "Not so long ago the School of Fine Arts was a box crammed with the gravest European prejudices, subjected to a dictatorial program. Today it is an empty box, quite empty, except for anarchy."[33]

30. *Excelsior*, Sept. 30, 1921.
31. Guillermo Sherwell, "Modern Tendencies in Mexican Art," *Pan-American Union Bulletin*, 4, 1922.
32. "El Movimiento," III, Julv 26, 1923.
33. Ibid., II, July 19, 1923.

The year 1922 saw some of the best among Ramos' Coyoacán students leave this painters' paradise to work hard on murals, "evading the only source of Truth: Nature," which Ramos thought he had permanently enthroned when he suppressed the classes in composition.

CHAPTER 5

Birth of a National Art

To study the Mexican school of painting that immediately precedes the mural era is to witness the awakening of a national plastic language, perhaps more important in its trend than in its actual results. The nationalist movement, whose fate was to be overshadowed by the greater daring of the muralist group, dared a great deal during the short season that it reigned unchallenged. It proved a substantial instrument in switching the taste of a lay public from the veneration of European *bon ton* to claims of a racial aesthetic. The Mexican renaissance would scarcely have flourished if this previous stream of Mexican art had not flowed its way.

Throughout the nineteenth century pictures were painted with Mexican subject matter, featuring popular costumes and mores. The *costumbristas,* artists like Hesiquio Iriarte and Casimiro Castro, were more adept at the graphic mediums than at painting. They left us an encyclopedic survey of nineteenth-century Mexico in albums of lithographs, some hand-colored, and a few pictures, now housed in the historical museum of Chapultepec. But, prophets in their own country, they remained without honor in their time, their works embedded anonymously in the plentiful and ever-varied folk production.

It took the recognized fine arts a long time to contact, unashamed, the Mexican milieu. The critics saw further ahead than the artists, and a leitmotiv runs through writings on art in the mid-nineteenth century, a sighing for a national art to match the national independence that had just been realized. When in 1869 Petronilo Monroy exhibited his allegory "The Constitution of '57," a flying female in

Pompeian drapes, critics admired it but suggested: "Beautiful as it may be, is it not time that our artists exploit the dormant wealth of our own ways of life, both old and new."[1]

José María Velasco was one master concerned with contemporary Mexico. His panoramas of the Mexican plateau received a medal of merit at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition of Philadelphia. Critic José Martí, like any Mephistopheles, dangled this as a lure to speed the coming of age of Mexican art:

> With the American appetite already excited, will our painters interest themselves in our types and landscapes, which should be a welcome fare for the eager curiosity of our neighbors?... and the curiosity of the wealthy is impatient to fill its need.
>
> ...Why not copy from life our open markets, our flower vendors, our promenades in Santa Anita, our fertile *chinampas,* bosoms perpetually saturated with flowers? Why not be practical, forget these useless schools of sacred and mythological subjects, and replace them by a school of Mexican types—pictures easy to sell and sure of success...
>
> To say that Mexican painting has no future... may be true in Mexico, where rich men lack equally in artistic knowledge, patriotic love, and good taste. But Mexican painting has a great future outside Mexico. Schauss in New York, and the benevolent Goupil in Paris, would be eager to secure our genre pictures.
>
> Cannot even the certainty of a life of ease shake our excellent painters out of their apathy? Would a trip to Italy tempt them or a meditation in the cemetery of Pisa, an *extasis* in front of Giotto, a contemplation before Angelico ... a morning in the Cathedral of Sevilla, or a sunset seen from the Alhambra of Granada?
>
> All this is theirs for the asking, with whatever price their pictures would command.[2]

Once the revolution of 1910 came about, the paradox of a majority of painters unaware of the national pride that shook their native

1. *El Renacimiento,* 1, 53.
2. In *Revista Universal,* Oct. 24, 1876.

hearth became acute. Manuel Gamio complained in 1916: "Painters copy Murillo, Rubens, Zuloaga, or still worse paint views of France, Spain, Italy, if need be of China, but hardly ever do they paint Mexico."[3] "Hardly ever" shows that Gamio was aware of exceptions to his statement. The contemporary plastic rediscovery of Mexico had already begun when he spoke those disheartened words.

In 1907 the young provincial painter Jorge Enciso had come from his native Guadalajara to seek his fortune in the capital. That he needed it is suggested by *El Kaskabel,* a jocular tapatio sheet, which swears that the artist made the memorable trip clinging under a boxcar, with his pictures rolled inside a pillowcase since he had no trunks but those he wore.[4]

At the time, serious art students, driven by the applause of enlightened amateurs and the photographic ideals of Maestro Fabres, were preparing to paint musketeers as jaunty as those of Roybet, odalisques as pink as those of Gérôme, and grenadiers as martial as those of Meissonnier. Unaware of this ambition, Enciso on arrival unrolled the fruit of his young life's work in the studio of Gerardo Murillo with whom he roomed, and soon opened a one-man show in Calle de San Francisco, No. 3, fourth floor. Three rooms were piled high with over 250 items, oils, pastels, charcoal and lead pencil drawings. On the cover of the catalogue a gentle *china poblana* bowed to her public before a background of *nopales;* green and red on white, the colors of the Mexican flag emphasized the national flavor (Fig. 9a).

All the pictures were on Mexican themes and of great simplicity. They were mostly landscapes, often merely a bare wall or a cubic house, with a few faceless people bundled in *sarape* or *rebozo,* their backs turned, unaware that they are being watched. Titles suggested the mood: "Muse of Dawn," "To Mass," "Old House."[5] An instant success, the show in its simplicity punctured the badly aimed pretension of the Fabres group, raising the grave question of a national art. Gómez Robelo wrote of the show:

3. In *Forjando Patria,* Mexico, 1916.
4. *El Kaskabel,* Guadalajara, June 30, 1907.
5. From the artist's own manuscript list of pictures and prices.

> Looking at the pictures one witnesses the whole range of skies, from the tremulous mauve of dawn until the blood purple of dusk passes us by... These revelations, loaded with the imponderable and unescapable power of art, bind us closer to our homeland by the subtle and resilient ties of an acknowledgment and love of its beauty.[6]

Besides contemporary landscapes, Enciso revived ancient Aztec themes. Such was "The Three Kings," with flowing quetzal plumes for headdresses, the figures holding copal censers. Such themes inspired the poet José Juan Tablada, who saw the artist and his Indian subject matter as one: "The eyes of Enciso are made of obsidian, sharp and brilliant as the silex arrows soaked in the fire of a star.... Brown and agile as an Aztec bowman, the artist resurrects the prodigy of Ilhuilcamina.... Arrows shot from his eyes blast stars from the firmament."[7]

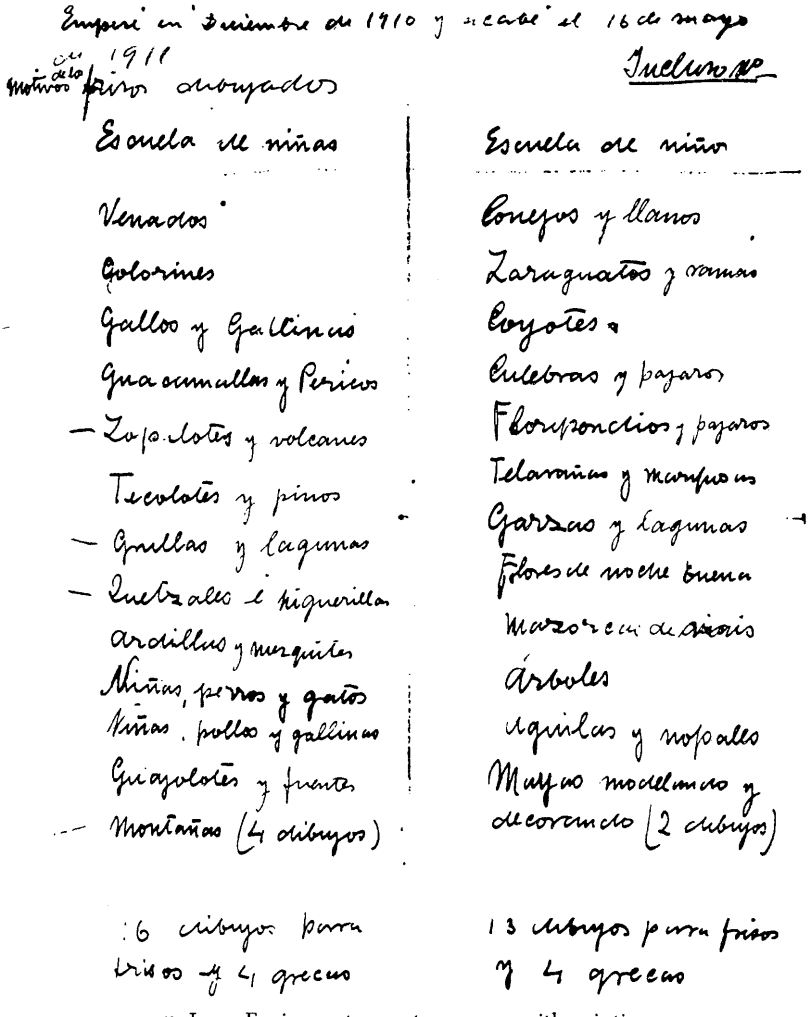
Enciso also painted the first twentieth-century murals with Amerindian content. Painted directly on the walls of two schools, one for boys and one for girls, in the not so aristocratic Colonia de la Bolsa, they were begun in December of 1910 and finished on May 16, 1911. They were destroyed when the buildings were remodeled (Text fig. v).

In 1912 *Cosmos Magazine* emphasized the importance of the artist:

> Enciso preserves a pure and sure love of the flowering soil of Mexico, enlightened by the noble and beautiful traditions of the Aztecs, adept at an art, symbolical and fecund, of the Indians sublimated by legends filled with the wild mysteries of an erratic sylvan race.... Until today, native art was mainly preyed upon by pedants, remiss in love and in understanding, though it should have been a source of most fecund inspiration. Enciso is the precursor of such a trend.[8]

His evaluation still holds good. After he became conservator of

6. In *El Diario Ilustrado*, June 23, 1907.
7. "La Exposición de Jorge Enciso," *El Imparcial*, June 25, 1907.
8. "Pintores Mexicanos: Jorge Enciso," *Cosmos*, Sept. 1912.



Empezé en Diciembre de 1910 y acabé el 16 de mayo de 1911

Motivos para frisos arbolados

Incluso No

Escuela de niñas	Escuela de niños
Venados	Conejos y llanos
Colorines	Zaraguates y ramas
Gallos y Gallinas	Coyotes
Guacamallas y Periquitos	Culebras y pajaros
— Zopilotes y volcanes	Floripondios y pajaros
Tecolotes y pinos	Telarañas y murciélagos
— Grullas y lagunas	Garzas y lagunas
— Culebras é higuerillas	Flores de noche buena
Armadillos y mezquites	Magueyes de Xochimilco
Niñas, perros y gatos	Árboles
Niñas, pollos y gallinas	Aguilas y nopales
Guajolotes y frutas	Mujeres modernas y decorativas (2 dibujos)
— Montañas (4 dibujos)	
16 dibujos para frisos y 4 grecas	13 dibujos para frisos y 4 grecas

v. Jorge Enciso, notes contemporary with painting of his 1910 murals. Courtesy of the artist.

colonial buildings, the artist stopped painting in 1915, but his influence remains an active factor in Mexican art.

Another pioneer, Saturnino Herrán, painted in a manner that states, even if it fails to solve, the problem of a national style as distinct from the stressing of local color. Born in 1888 and dead at thirty, Herrán, during his short life, was a not too successful painter, rounding out a meager income with a life class at the Academy of San Carlos. Making virtue of necessity, Herrán never left Mexico, never failed to paint Mexican themes. Typical of his work is "El Rebozo," dated 1916, a nude mestiza with national trimmings, a corner of the metropolitan cathedral, Mexican fruits, a Mexican hat. The hazelnut skin, the gold-embossed charro felt hat, a damask cloth, the "churrigueresque" stone-lace of the colonial façade—all stress Mexico. But staying at home failed somehow to immunize Herrán against Europe. He had looked long and hard at magazine illustrations and at what foreign originals came his way. Dominant influences are those of the Englishman Brangwyn and the Spaniard Zuloaga, while the melancholy mood of much of the work parallels what Herrán could learn from reproductions of the blurred art of the Frenchman Eugène Carrière. But critics overlooked his style and stressed his subject matter. When he died, Herrán became a symbol of Mexicanism and was hailed as "the Mexican who was most a painter and the painter who was most Mexican."

Herrán's version of a Mexico mulling over its legendary past, its vitality snuffed out under a silt of decayed gentility, met naturally with but little sympathy from the muralists, whose own version of the scene rated arsenic over old lace. But in the short-lived apotheosis that followed his untimely death, Herrán made Mexicans proud of the potentialities of a national school of painting.

Tapatio-born like Enciso, Roberto Montenegro started painting at the Guadalajara academy of Félix Bernadelli. The first printed record of this hardy perennial of Mexican art is an entry in the catalogue of the 1900 Paris World Fair, when the precocious artist was only thirteen years old by his own count: "Roberto Montenegro (de Guadalajara): Peinture."

Montenegro came to the capital in 1905 to study with Fabres. At

San Carlos he vied with Diego Rivera for top honors. Their reward came in 1906—a single fellowship to Europe. The deadlock of excellency between the two adolescents was decided in favor of Montenegro on the toss of a coin. He left a few months before Diego could raise enough money to follow him.

Both were back home for the Feasts of the Centennial of 1910, and both become consecrated masters, carting back crates of canvases to prove it. This time Rivera did beat his rival to the draw with a show that opened at San Carlos in November 1910. Montenegro's opened in February of the next year at the Vilches Salons.

The young provincial had quickly shed in Europe whatever naïveté he may have had. He returned labeled as "an enthusiastic and spontaneous disciple of the novel decadent tendencies." His fondness in paint for "spasmodic women, ambiguous ephebi, sinister masks, and refined perversions"[9] opened mauve vistas to the good burghers of the capital, whose guilty dreams went no further than the pool of a Turkish harem.

Once their sales were made and their fame secure at home, Montenegro and Rivera returned to Europe, missing most of the revolution. While Diego, become a cubist, brewed alchemies of the fourth dimension in Paris, Roberto deftly mixed plastic cocktails, Bakst-colored and spiked with a dash of Aubrey Beardsley. Henri de Régnier found his pen-and-ink drawings a match for his own sophisticated poems. In the casino of Palma de Mallorca in 1919 Montenegro painted a mural, his first.

It is a change of heart that brings him within the scope of this chapter. From the vantage point of Europe, Montenegro discovered the Mexican scene, and by 1919 his conversion was made public. "Mexican Motifs," a set of etchings, "is a constant exhortation to American artists, a model showing why they should cultivate the milieu of their birth in preference to any other.... A prominent aspect of Roberto Montenegro's personality is his will to orient American artists towards their fatherland, and to offer them a precedent" (Fig. 9b).[10] Previous mural training and Mexican subject matter

9. Silvio Lago, "Roberto Montenegro," *El Universal Ilustrado*, Jan. 31, 1919.
10. Ibid.

made the artist a natural choice to receive, when the time came, the first government-sponsored mural commission.

Adolfo Best Maugard also reached nationalism in a roundabout way. Wrote Pedro Henríquez Ureña: "Around 1910, when Adolfo was very young, a young and promising painter, he illustrated an ethnological study by the learned investigator Franz Boas, reproducing in all their minutiae and variety the archaic decorations of the ancient tribes of the Mexican valley.... There were over 2,000 drawings."[11] The artist's personal thoughts concerning this commissioned data became the nucleus of a drawing method that stressed the common denominator latent in the fine arts. He discovered a plastic alphabet of seven elements, "the spiral, the circle, the half-circle, the S form, the wavy line, the zigzag, the straight line."[12]

Shedding an earlier and more conventional style of painting, Best recut his own art to fit his discovery. A colorist's gift and a charming flair for décor proved a powerful help in selling his somewhat abstract product to the world. In December 1919 Best opened a one-man show in New York at the Knoedler Galleries. The cover of the catalogue reproduces a night fiesta, a Tehuana drawn Persian-wise, with a rose in her hair and a toy church at her feet, her pose corresponding to an intricate curlicue chalked on the black sky by an exploding fire rocket. Among the pictures shown, "Manola," "Ranchera," "La Novia," and "La Noche" stand for Hispanism; "Tennis," "La Fête," and "The Broadway Girl" represent cosmopolitanism; "China Poblana," "Judas Rojo," "Aztec Warrior," and "La Fiesta" are studies for ballets (Fig. 10).

Best was the first to parade a distinctive Mexican art through foreign capitals, and to prove the truth of Martí's pithy saying of fifty years before: "Mexican painting has a great future—outside Mexico." The sets and costumes that Best designed for Anna Pavlova's "Mexican Ballet" were endorsed both by Paris and New York.

In Mexico the acceptance of his plastic theories dates from the centennial celebrations of 1921, of which Best was appointed master of ceremonies. *Excelsior* gave an advance summary of the occur-

11. "Epilogue," in Best Maugard, *Método*.
12. Best Maugard, *Método*, pp. 26–27.

rence: "Monday the 26th at 7:30 P.M., Mexican Night in Chapultepec Park; charity bazaar, cavalcade, dances, regional singing, great national dance (jarabe tapatio), illuminations, fireworks. The Citizen President of the Republic will attend."[13] The feast took place on the evening of the 27th. A gate crasher was an American stunt flyer in his lighted plane, who bore the Yankee *nom de guerre* of Mr. Pickup.

But the other attractions were full of local color as planned: "At 8:30 P.M. fireworks on the great lake announced by the detonation of seven firecrackers. At 9:30 eruption of Popocatépetl, a mock eruption of colored fireworks."[14] Best Maugard still feels wistful about it: "I felt like a pascha, alone in a little boat on the lake, and each time I lifted my hand, thousands of pesos of fireworks filled the night sky."

As a sequel to this success, in 1922 the Best system was adopted by the public schools of the Federal District and called "Mexican Drawing." A textbook was published in July 1923 entitled *Drawing Method. Tradition Revival and Evolution of Mexican Art,* illustrated with most attractive vignettes by Miguel Covarrubias, who was then just beginning. It was distributed to teachers of the new method at a ceremony held in the auditorium of the Preparatoria School on November 6, 1923. In his presentation speech Orozco Muñoz said that the teachers "brought to official schools something like an offering of grace and happiness.... Each day, each hour, in the light of this love, they have seen emerge from tiny Indian hands, amber-hued or cinnamon-dyed, their ancestors' souls become flower, dream fountain, or magical royal peacock."[15] The method reached a wider public in an English translation whose repeated printings still play a substantial role in the rejuvenation of antiquated teaching methods in the United States.[16]

The apparent simplicity of the "seven elements" hid deep thought. Versed in the esoteric lore of Hambidge and Bragdon, Best had raised his own sights from the physical types to the mental archetype. Mindful of the world of shapes in which the painter dwells, he investigated what in commonplace language could be called the

13. *Excelsior,* Sept. 1, 1921.
14. Ibid., Sept. 28, 1921.
15. Orozco Muñoz, in *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública,* 2nd sem. 1923, p. 456.
16. Best Maugard, *A Method for Creative Design,* New York, Knopf, 1926.

Shape of God. This First Shape imposes its law on the world of shapes, the realm of plastic arts, as the First Good does on the world of morals. The natural law, justifying Best's thought, "consists ... of the phases of the Whirling Spiral perceived in its projection in the flat, which gives the seven lines common to all primitive art."[17]

While his method helped multitudes to self-expression, the growing philosophical strain ended by smothering Best's own will to paint. His gifted hands fell limp as he concentrated on the Whirling Spiral just as Faustus had on the magic disk. "Aesthetic ... is what has been called by philosophers 'the musical state' or the 'lyric state,' or what is known as 'ecstasy' in the practices of mysticism."[18] His was a brand of mysticism closer to the oriental than to the Catholic since it proved incompatible with action. Best never actually took part in the mural movement when it came. The commission he received in 1922 to paint the private offices of Secretary Vasconcelos was never even begun.

Perhaps one element of Best's art made it difficult for him to work on walls in the Mexico of the twenties. Art by the people for the people came to be the underlying motto of the painters who sat on scaffolds. Best dreamed of an art so exclusive that it would even snub aristocrats: "In the period in which we are now living, a new form of art expression is to appear. It will correspond to a social group more highly evolved than any other heretofore ... the forerunner of a new race of beings endowed with superior characteristics."[19] The superman in Best himself was exteriorized in impeccable suits, a cane, and white gloves, and in the cultivation of a "somewhat Duc de Guise" profile, as a contemporary critic remarked. But such goings against the grain of our own fashion of overalls never ruffled the bonds of mutual affection between the muralists and this gentle man.

An important task of the nationalists proved to be the reappraisal of folk art. The turning point in public appreciation was the show of folk crafts that opened on September 19, 1921, on Montenegro's

17. Ibid., p. 162.
18. Ibid., p. 171.
19. Ibid., p. 172.

initiative, patterned after a show of Russian folk arts that he had admired in Paris. On the day of the opening:

> Having observed the display at leisure, the Chief Executive and dignitaries repaired to an inner court where small tables, exquisitely set with artistic crockery made in Mexico, were tastefully scattered.... The diplomats' ladies and other selected guests savored with evident relish national dainties, tamales and *atole,* plain or mixed with chocolate to taste.... From the crowd that remained outside we heard heated remarks for inviting to such a feast only the chosen few.[20]

In a moment the popular arts had bridged the gap between untouchability and exclusiveness. Atl wrote in 1922: "Today people of good taste feature in their homes a drawing room, a library, or a den decorated 'after the fashion of the Exhibition.' "[21]

After its close in Mexico City, the show was sent to Los Angeles with Best Maugard and Xavier Guerrero as its impresarios. In a radio talk on October 2, 1922, sponsored by the *Los Angeles Examiner,* Best Maugard boasted: "I am proud to be the first to state that the art of the Mexican people is the precise realization of what are still tendencies among European artists."[22] The show also resulted in the publication of a substantial catalogue, Dr. Atl's *Folk Arts of Mexico,* still the source book on the subject, which made a wealth of untapped patterns and designs available to painters.

Stylistically, nationalism found another way out of academism than the kind of impressionism favored at the time by Ramos Martínez. The lineal beauty of lacquer and pottery patterns, with their balance of flat areas, was not unlike that of Persian miniatures, then the fashion in a Paris all agog over Poiret turbans and Bakst costume designs. Because of the similarity, the works of Best and Montenegro were enthusiastically received by people of informed taste. The public at large accepted such works only later, having recoiled in horror from the first frescoes. But during the short period in which the

20. A composite report from *Excelsior* and *El Universal,* Sept. 20, 1921.
21. *Artes populares,* 1, 22.
22. In *La Falange,* Dec. 1, 1921.

nationalist style reigned alone (1920–21) laymen were set against it.

Excelsior reviewed the fine-arts exhibition of 1921: "That the decorator of pots and pans draws incorrectly, well and good! But why the national treasury should pension a turbulent herd of would-be painters who, incapable of creation, kill time making bad copies of what Indian potters and lacquer painters do well, is beyond understanding."[23]

As is the fate of transitional styles, nationalism, attacked for its daring by conservative elements, was despised by the true vanguard for its timidity. Orozco spat on the picturesqueness that was synonymous with the movement:

> Indeed we Mexicans are the first ones to blame for having concocted and nurtured the myth of the ridiculous charro and the absurd china as symbols of so-called Mexicanism.... At the sight of a charro or a china, at the opening notes of the horrible jarabe, one is automatically reminded of the nauseating Mexican stage, and all this, amalgamated, becomes "Our Own." Whose own? Why pick the most outdated and most ridiculous attributes of a single social class and inflict them on the whole country?[24]

Rivera shrugged it off: "Our youngsters oscillate from the admiration of Ramos Martínez to the influence of Leon Bakst, thinking that they further Nationalist art."[25]

Good or bad, Mexican art was far from dormant before walls came to be painted. It was in fact in the throes of giving birth to a new style. Nationalist art honorably fills the interregnum between academism and the rise of the mural school. It was a movement at once brave, in the sense that it featured local elements despised under Díaz, and timid, insofar as it sifted these folk ingredients through a mesh of propriety and elegance that left them blanched, nerveless, and deodorized. Its timing, however, was wrong. The nationalist trend was gathering momentum at the very moment that the tougher art of the muralists rendered it obsolete.

23. A. Root, "Destellos," *Excelsior*, Oct. 8, 1921.
24. Unpublished manuscript, 1923.
25. "Dos Años," *Azulejos*, Dec. 1923.

CHAPTER 6

Premural Portents

Whatever their source, bookish Marxism or the slowly laid sediment of individual grievances, social theories in revolutionary Mexico were no longer simply ideas. They had acquired body, just as the transparent, imponderable element, air, at times becomes opaque, "thick enough to cut with a knife." Individuals existed within an element of social consciousness as real as pea-soup fog. It held individuals together better than clean air, and directed each and all toward common ideas and actions, artists no less than laymen.

Twice Rivera attempted to describe the phenomenon: "In Mexico, as in any other part of the world whose destiny is to witness the birth of a new civilization based on cohesion and harmony among producers, there exists a restlessness of the masses, deep, slow, formidable as a quake or an undertow. On its surface, personages oscillate and totter, believing they are self-propelled."[1] And more specifically: "Our hope is based on the fact that all personages, positive as well as negative, of this as yet minute movement, are impelled by a deep force: the aspirations of the masses, which shake the surface of the country as does an earthquake. Let us hope that some artist or group of artists manages to give such aspirations a voice."[2]

This milieu was preconditioned to breed group action and communal mural work as a natural outlet for collective emotions. Some sort of subterranean initiation had long been smoldering, a

1. "Dos Años," *Azulejos*, Dec. 1923.
2. "De Pintura," *La Falange*, Aug. 1, 1923.

chrysalis stage that left few clues, but that alone explains the winged swiftness of the rebirth.

The spilling over of an aesthetic into the field of sociology would, in most countries, be a question of taste rather than of emergency. In Mexico sociologists unconcerned with the arts came to the conclusion that art alone could be trusted to perform certain urgent social tasks, even before the artists themselves had realized it clearly.

Ethnologist 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:

> 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—as it does not bear on our purpose—let us observe both other classes. They are already split by ethnical 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.
>
> Mexico does not produce legitimate works of art as yet, because to be legitimate it should first be its own, a national art that would mirror, intensified and beautified, the pleasures, sufferings, life and soul of the people.

Murals are the logical genre for pictures envisaged as social levers, and some painters worked on walls at least a decade before the renaissance came of age. We have mentioned Enciso's school murals. In 1910, during the last days of the Díaz regime, a guild of young artists that included Orozco secured a government commission to

paint a collective mural in the auditorium of the Preparatoria School, on the very wall where Rivera was to paint his first mural in 1922:

> The Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts has announced to the members of the group of Mexican Painters and Sculptors that they are to carry out the decoration of the Auditorium of the Preparatoria School.
>
> The news was received with enthusiasm by Mexican artists, who will hold a meeting on Monday night to decide which is the best way to present the project to the Secretary of Public Instruction, Don Justo Sierra.
>
> Artist Gerardo Murillo will specify his ideas about the theme suggested by the Ministry: Human Evolution. All the members agree that the commission should not be given by contest but instead that all should collaborate on a single project....
>
> The work will begin as soon as the Ministry allows it. Given the number of artists involved, completion will follow in a very short time.[3]

The moment the painters' scaffolds were hammered in place, an uprising people swept Maecenas Sierra out of office and scattered the would-be painters for the people all over the military map. Artistic rebirth had to give precedence to the armed revolution. An explicit manifesto antedating the motives and aims current in the twenties was set forth by Dr. Atl, on accepting his nomination as director of the School of Fine Arts in 1914:

> Architects, painters, and sculptors should not work with an exhibition or a degree in view, but rather to make or decorate a building...
>
> Reform must come at the same pace in the political, administrative, military, and artistic orders. If in this moment of universal renovation the Mexican artists, pleading the serenity of their sacerdocy, remain inert, refuse to play a consciously virile part in the struggle, if they let others do their job and fail to leaven the national upsurge with the purity of their good

3. *El Imparcial,* Nov. 13, 1910.

> will and the thrust of their energy, then the rolling avalanche is sure to leave them behind, in a heap of debris.[4]

This call to action sent Orozco out from the academy to war-geared Orizaba, drafted Siqueiros while in his teens into the staff of General Diéguez, and their self-denial bore rich fruits. Atl could note with pride in 1923: "Some of the artists who acquire stature today in the field of painting shouldered a gun and believed in the Revolution."[5]

The portents that heralded the renaissance remained scattered and unfulfilled until José Vasconcelos became president of the University in June 1920. In July Ramos Martínez was elected director of the Academy and in August opened a one-man show by Carlos Mérida (Text fig. VI).

In the Mexico of 1920, where modern art remained deadlocked between impressionism and a nationalist *art nouveau*, Mérida's pictures

VI. Carlos Mérida, poster advertising his 1920 exhibition. Collection Jean Charlot.

4. In *Boletín*, 1 (1914), 74.
5. "Renacimiento artístico?" *El Universal*, July 13, 1923.

were the first to propose greater possibilities. Born in Guatemala of Mayan stock, he studied and painted in Paris, knew Picasso, and befriended Modigliani. Engrossed with Indian lore, he transposed Mayan motifs into modern idiom on his return to America (Fig. 11).

As an introduction to the catalogue of his show, Mérida wrote a manifesto whose compact text forms the marrow of many a later and longer plea:

> My painting is fired with an intimate conviction that it is imperative to produce a totally American art. I believe that America, possessed of such a glorious past, with both nature and race original in character, will doubtless breed a personal artistic expression. This is a task for the prophetic vision of the young artists of America.

The catalogue was filled with Guatemaltecan site names: Almolonga, Panajachel, Chichicasteca, Ixtanquiqui, Patzum, Zumpango, Atitlán. Themes appeared for the first time that later frescoes by other men have made familiar: "Tribute to Maize," "Tehuanas," "The Feast of the Dead." Three projects for mural decorations proved that Mérida was ready for walls two years before he got them.

El Universal reviewed the show, noting its "Indian atmosphere" and its "indigenously rustic style": "The work accomplished by artist Mérida is extremely meritorious. We are dealing with a superb collection of pictures, stylized, futuristic, based on simple lines and curves, striking a novel harmony and unity. There is much of the primitive American soul in this strange art whose style may reign in art schools within a few years."[6]

Though the pictures were easel-size, the mural intimation was so strong as to disorient unprepared critical opinion. Even fellow artists failed to recognize the shape of things to come. Said Francisco de la Torre: "I believe it difficult to find a practical application for them. To fulfill the aim of all decorative art, they should be the planned complement of an adequate architecture... I think that they do not answer the aesthetic necessities of the moment, and

6. *El Universal*, Aug. 27, 1920.

correspond to a type of architecture that does not exist, at least in Mexico."[7]

Disagreeing with Vasconcelos, who believed Montenegro to be the pioneer of the Mexican movement, Rivera rightly advanced Mérida's priority: "Carlos Mérida... was first to incorporate American picturesqueness into true painting, and none can remain unmoved by his grave and rich color harmonies."[8] And the portents multiplied. The following back-page item in *El Universal* on July 30, 1920, may prove of more lasting worth than the spectacular first-page scoop for that day: the surrender of Pancho Villa.

> Yesterday news reached us that the well-known Mexican artist Alfaro Siqueiros has taken over the artistic direction of the important magazine *Vida Americana*, published in Barcelona. The personality of Siqueiros is widely known in Mexico.... This directorship ... constitutes a substantial personal triumph.

Vida Americana did not materialize until ten months later, in May 1921. The first and last number of this short-lived publication headlined the "Three Appeals of Timely Orientation to Painters and Sculptors of the New American Generation," wherein Siqueiros amplified Mérida's bare premises into a countenance of the coming American renaissance. From the vantage point of his European post, Siqueiros spoke to the generation just come of age in both Americas.

The first appeal dealt with "Prejudicial Influences and New Tendencies":

> Our work is on the whole out of step with the times, progresses incoherently, produces next to nothing of permanent worth to match the robustness of our great racial gifts....
>
> We must live our marvelous dynamic age! love the modern machine, dispenser of unexpected plastic emotions, the contemporary aspects of our daily life, our cities in the process of construction, the sober and practical engineering of our modern buildings stripped of architectural complexities... Above

7. Interview in *El Heraldo de México*, Aug. 29, 1920.
8. "Diego de Rivera discute," *El Demócrata*, March 2, 1924.

> all, we must remain firmly convinced that the Art of the Future is bound to be, barring unavoidable transitory decadence, ascendingly Superior!

Clangorous as a Marinetti manifesto, the program was tempered by deep respect for both European and American traditions:

> We must make our work conform to inviolable laws of aesthetic balance as did the classical painters, become as skilled laborers as they, regard the ancients as models for their constructive core and great sincerity....
>
> An understanding of the admirable human content of "Negro art" and of "primitive art" in general has oriented the plastic arts towards a clarity and depth lost for four centuries in an underbrush of indecision; as regards ourselves, we must come closer to the works of the ancient settlers of our vales, Indian painters and sculptors (Mayan, Aztec, Inca, etc., etc.)... Let us borrow their synthetic energy, but let us avoid lamentable archaeological reconstructions so fashionable among us, "Indianism," "Primitivism," "Americanism."

Most pregnant of the "Three Appeals" is the second, which deals with "The Preponderance of the Constructive Spirit over the Decorative or Analytical":

> We draw silhouettes, filling them with pretty colors; when modeling, we remain engrossed in skin-deep arabesques and overlook the concept of great primary masses: cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders, pyramids, the scaffold of all plastic architecture ... First of all, let us be constructors ... amass and erect solidly, with minute subservience to truth, our own commotion in front of nature....
>
> Granted a consistent armature, let us, if need be, caricature to humanize.[9]

The timing of this manifesto was perfect—May of 1921, the month José Vasconcelos gave the first mural commission, the month the

9. Siqueiros, "3 Llamamientos," *Vida Americana*, No. 1, Barcelona, May 1921.

rubble mound on the lot of the future ministry and the soiled former chapel of San Pedro y San Pablo were turned over to him for reclamation. Wherever it touched its intended public the message bore fruit. While I was a resident of Coyoacán, the Ramos Martínez group, including future muralists, read the appeals and pondered their implications.

The exhibition of "National Art" of September-October 1921 presented, on the surface, homogeneous nationalist tendencies. There were a few rebels, such as cubist Fermín Revueltas, but it was rather the younger artists' mental inquietude and general dissatisfaction with their work that marked this show as the close of an era. One of the finest minds among them, Carmen Fonserrada, who was to die in her youth, criticized the show, saying: "The majority of our artists remain idle.... The public beautifies its homes as usual with chromos and enlarged portrait photographs framed in heavy gilt." She admitted that her melancholy stemmed from having read the editorial of the current *International Studio*, with comments such as: "This is the age of speed. Everything must be sacrificed on the altar of this twentieth-century idol... 'Don't write, Telegraph!' In the arts likewise speed is coming into its own.... Gentlemen, this is the age of water color."[10]

Although the text may have spurred some painters on to rapidly wash "papers," it influenced Carmen Fonserrada in the opposite way. Spurning speed, she dreamed of a medium so unwieldy that no comprise with shorthand methods would be feasible. She went on to say: "The destiny of a work of art should not be to end in a museum, small or big, public or private.... Works of art should not lose contact with the daily life of the people. The epochs that produced great mural painting seem gone forever ... it is for us artists AN OBLIGATION to create a fit setting for the art of Mexico."[11]

Carmen sighed for "epochs that produced great mural painting" rather than for individual painters. She was not alone in her disapproval of the Parisian stress on the individual as the *sine qua non* of art; other young artists groped toward a return to an objective

10. "The Age of Watercolor," *International Studio*, Sept. 1921.
11. *Revista de Revistas*, Oct. 28, 1921.

tradition such as that transmitted in the past by guilds or, in modern terms, syndicates of artists-craftsmen. Reacting against the freedom that Martínez had wished upon a growing generation, a few longed for a comeback to some collective discipline, not unlike the one that San Carlos had known of old: "The official academies ... at least brought us in contact with the classics."

Araujo summed up the historical angle:

> An academism both wretchedly sick and most dictatorial served as a cradle for the painters of the preceding generation; in turn it nurtured an anxiety for freedom that toppled academism to the ground and ministered at the birth of individualistic selfishness ... The young have not known the indispensable apprenticeship bred of cooperation with masters ... There exists, however, a small group of young painters and sculptors weary of this anarchical state, set on returning to such a discipline.[12]

Our belief in a useful relationship between master and disciples was correlated with a belief in the rationality of the actual making of art. The workshop or syndicate we hoped for concerned craft as well as aesthetics. In 1914 Dr. Atl had stated:

> To be essentially practical, the teaching of fine arts must start with the elements that lay a technical basis: how to prepare pigments, canvas, wall; which pigments are sound and which unsound; how to put a brush together ... in a word to learn all those things that qualify the physical elements of works made to relay, when completed, the sensitive strength of the artist.[13]

In 1917, lecturing in Paris on "We, the Young," I said: "For us, artisan is the word most closely linked to art ... Discarded techniques are resurrected; one tries his hand at fresco, distemper, egg tempera, polychrome carving; some insist on personally preparing their pigments."[14]

12. "El Movimiento," II, *El Demócrata*, July 19, 1923.
13. In *Boletín*, 1 (1914), 74.
14. *Le Petit Messager des Arts*, No. 39, Feb. 10–March 1, 1917.

Meanwhile in Mexico Xavier Guerrero came to art steeped in the wise and traditional ways of the house painter, and Carlos Mérida hoped for a combination of technical soundness and aesthetics. "They call themselves artists and cannot prepare a pail of glue-tempera paint" was Mérida's disdainful comment on academicians.

But living masters had as yet no workshops where tradition could be transmitted by word of mouth and tested with one's hands. A young painter concerned with tradition had to unravel the intricacies of its golden thread for himself, so as to isolate the constant that ties modern to ancient art.

The period just preceding the mural renaissance was used by many painters for a severe reassessment of contemporary art in the light of the past. Though none admitted to a premonition of things to come, their intense study amounted to a kind of spiritual retreat. The painters emerged from this meditative pause invigorated and ready for action. Before their return to Mexico, Amado de la Cueva and Siqueiros worshiped, crayon in hand, at Masaccio's Brancacci Chapel in Florence. Rivera's trip to Rome and Ravenna at the end of 1920 put him in contact with works of such magnitude that no private collector but only a government or a church could finance and house them. The hundreds of sketches that Diego made there, mainly after Roman and Byzantine mosaics, the mark left on him by Etruscan tombs and Michelangelo, form a cleft in his European work between the eclectic analytical comment (the Cézannesque "Edge of the Forest," the Renoiresque "In the Vineyard," both painted in 1920) and the germ of monumental synthesis latent in "Head of a Boy" of 1921.[15] In recognition of his debt to ancient art, Rivera introduced in his first mural, "Creation," a figure symbolizing "Tradition, an Indian woman of the working class, with crimson skirt, rebozo of red earth, hands at rest in her lap."[16] According to Rivera: "Siqueiros and de la Cueva returned, ardently eager, their spirits fired by recent contact with the timeless painting, without epoch or fashion, of the great Italians and with the modern Parisian

15. *Diego Rivera,* Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1931, plates 11, 14, 15.
16. Rivera, "Las Pinturas del Amfiteatro de la Preparatoria," *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública,* 1 (1923), 363.

effort, meaning that of Picasso *et al.*"[17] The statement could have applied to him as well.

In the 1920s the fabric of art was rent in two by one main issue—plastic values versus descriptive powers. Afraid of being accused of literature in paint, the more progressive among Parisian artists favored indifferent subject matter—a pipe, a guitar, a glass, a bottle; if they attempted a figure they saw to it that it was idle. It was left to the Mexicans to remark that such a wary attitude is unsupported by the achievements of past periods. The propaganda murals that the Church had sponsored, those of the Byzantines, of Masaccio, of Michelangelo, those of colonial Mexico as well, how could their plastic form be separated from their literary content? Did not the one imply the other? In reaction against the current boycott of significant subject matter, we upheld a return to didactic art. In 1917 I had written: "Art is in direct ratio to the intensity and depth of the idea it propounds, and this idea depends on the artist, conditioned by time and milieu.... The role that the artist comes to play is thus that of a master with all its greatness as well as its responsibilities."[18]

The first artist who deserves to be called a painter to the people is Francisco Goitia, "a militant and active fighter for the Revolution in its period of armed action."[19] He carried the difficult relationship between fine arts and the brutal tempo of his times to an integrated peak. A landowner, Goitia renounced his wealth to come closer to the common people in whom the revolution had been made manifest. Known to practice chastity and corporeal mortification, his shaved head and meek bearing spelled out the natural ascetic.

Goitia lived hidden in a one-room Indian shack in tourist-packed Xochimilco, with a straw mat flung in a corner for sleeping; the center space was taken up by a bulky press that served to print the successive states of a single etching with which he was forever dissatisfied. Unlike that of most, his desire for perfection was not toward self-realization but toward self-effacement. Rather than use the picture as a spokesman for his ego, he wished to hold it up as an

17. "De Pintura," *La Falange*, Aug. 1, 1923.
18. *Le Petit Messager*, No. 39.
19. Siqueiros, "Carta a Orozco," *Hoy*, No. 398, 1944.

unpolluted mirror to the facts he deemed it important to disclose. Although he lived strictly apart, impervious to our collective style and gregarious ways, Goitia shouldered a cross of collective responsibility better than any one of us (Fig. 12).

His incredible scruple and respect for truth did not allow him to paint without a model, which in his case did not imply trite subject matter. On the march with revolutionary troops, he once built a shack around a gallows, planning to come back later and study the sheltered rotting corpse at leisure. Another scene struck his creative vein: A lone guerrilla had fought all day against the federals. At dusk, when they could not see him any more, he goaded them with shouted insults towards the place of his lone ambush. When at last they killed him, enraged by his bravado, they strapped his body high up on a tree, cut off his head, and on the stump placed the skull of a butchered bull. Adds Goitia: "They half stripped him of his pants, which trailed to the ground from his ankles, as if stretching his hoisted body to superhuman length." Regardless of the difficulties involved in finding the correct materials for a composite model of human and ox flesh, one of the painter's hopes was to one day eternize that bleeding minotaur!

The archives of the Academy of San Carlos have preserved the draft of a letter, humble in tone and prophetic in content, that he wrote to the Secretary of Public Instruction and Fine Arts:

November 23, 1913.

> ...Even while living in foreign parts, I felt impelled to return and work toward an art that would be our own. I now intend to dedicate all my energies to this ideal ... contributing to the aesthetic progress of our country, so much in need of it.... To fight the decorations in very bad taste that invade the interior of our churches, and to open instead the doors to mural painting; a most essential point fated to bring about miracles, revolutionize our milieu, and give birth to a national art.... Up to now, nothing has been done toward furnishing guidance in these matters, but in the future, perhaps not a long time need elapse before fresco painting—with which I myself am concerned—

> will begin to cover the walls of churches, of hospitals and public buildings, with creations in which the characteristics both of our country and of our time will be embodied.[20]

When the renaissance came at last, it came along the lines that Goitia had envisioned, but he preferred not to join the too-public fray and, full of humility, managed to hide from the long reach of Vasconcelos' arm. In her unpublished diary of these years Anita Brenner has preserved the mood and some of the artist's sayings:

> December 26, 1925: Goitia and Charlot to lunch. Goitia spoke more intimately of himself and his way of work. To hints of an exhibition he replies very indifferently; since he does not paint to sell he would rather his work was known after his death. "La vida de los miserables," he states with real joy, "me encanta ... I cannot paint unless I am held to my depths by the emotion of the thing.... I paint rapidly, but for a moment of work I need one month or six or more of meditation."
>
> September 18, 1926: Spent the afternoon taking photos of Goitia's things.... He spoke of the decoration of a little chapel in Xochimilco. He is about ready to begin. Next year he thinks. He had the first definite study for it. It was the first moment of resurrection. An old woman, shrouded, shrunken, about to awake. His nurse was the model. "She was not like that when she nursed me. One who has given all she has to give to the world." (Fig. 13).... He thinks of decorating the chapel with religious and allegorical subjects, and flora and fauna in the small spaces, something like Gozzoli he says. He is going to make prophets and sybils with Xochimilco models. Thinks they come very near being the exact thing. "The Apostles were fishermen and people like that." It is an idea that has to sink in little by little, he says.... He is concerned most of all with the idea, and seeks the pitch of emotion. And when one stands there frankly overwhelmed he looks carefully, with his hat in his hand and his head a little tilted, inquires in a sweet, small voice, "Does it please you?"

20. Archives of San Carlos, 1913, folder 5, carbon copy, unsigned.

> October 17, 1926: Edward [Weston], Brett and I went out to Xochimilco this morning.... Then we went to Goitia's. He had ready for us two beautiful girls all dressed in native costumes. We took that and also bits of his patio which is rock and cactus and doves. He says he once had a dove like marble. He loves the constant noises that his animals make as he loved the constant noise in one tenement he painted. He says that when he painted it there was an organ playing *La Golondrina*. And wants to arrange for the organ to be there again when I go see it.
>
> He showed us his things. He had a Teotihuacán idol that was terribly Egyptian. Below an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe he has a glass case like the one in which the image of the lacerated image of Christ appears in Indian churches. Inside he has a small brass bed with an image at the head. Upon it on a tiny embroidered coverlet rests a head of Christ almost life-size. It fills or almost fills the case.

His mural plans failed because of a hypersensitive conscience concerning whatever related to his mission. I saw a moving oil sketch of a "Purgatory," planned for the same Xochimilco chapel; figures, bathed between red fires of pain and blue lights of purification, huddled around the soul of a priest who read aloud the holy office —unborn saints, as it were, in a macrocosmic womb. On my next visit the picture had disappeared. Goitia was then planning fewer figures on a larger scale. But the next time I came, even that plan had been discarded. He excused himself cautiously: "Perhaps purgatory is not after all part of the expression of the revolution."

Gamio's premise and Goitia's practice came together at least once on professional grounds. It is to the credit of the scientist that, when he started his inquiry into the correlated archaeology, ethnology, and sociology of Teotihuacán, he turned to Goitia, asking him to put freely on canvas the elusive and imperative things that science cannot contact nor statistics pin down.

Thus, various threads came to weave a picture that resembled the Mexican renaissance even before its inception: a desire to reach the masses instead of drawing room or museum; an insistence on

artisanship as opposed to artistry, on collective discipline as against individualism; a stress on guild recipes as a complement to inspiration, on monumentality over arabesque; an awareness of American sources and climate coupled with a deep respect for European achievements. The main departure from the Parisian current stylistic fashion was the unashamed acceptance of story-telling as a kind of didactic core around which the physical picture could be ordered.

When at last the time came to paint murals, it meant, more than the acceptance of a chance job, the avowal of a deep-seated, slowly matured conviction that justifies the quick fruits born of our contact with walls.

CHAPTER 7

The Deus Ex Machina

A pungent cartoon by René d'Harnoncourt portrays a blond tourist decked out in sombrero, zarape, *guaraches,* and the Indian *calzoncillo,* sketching the Mexican landscape. A local amateur watches the proceedings with polite interest. He is dressed in black frock coat, patent leather shoes, conservative homburg, stiff collar, and black bow tie. It is to this Creole type, contrasting in dress and customs with Indian and mestizo, who alone are the topics of travelogues, that José Vasconcelos belongs by birth and by choice. He once aptly characterized his physique as that of the petty bureaucrat. He wears black, and instead of the pistol bulge at the loins that mars the politico's jacket, one feels that the void between his arm and hip should be filled by the portfolio of the process server.

This unpicturesque gentleman is the *deus ex machina* of the Mexican renaissance. The mural movement was launched during his term as Secretary of Education under Obregón (1921–24); walls, material expenses, artists' salaries, and, most important of all, stylistic freedom, all those indispensable ingredients were procured through him personally and were in fact corollaries of his own philosophy applied to the social system.

His father had roamed about as custom officer, settling longest at the borders which separated Mexico from Texas. José's youth was spent in Piedras Negras, or as it is called "over the bridge," Eagle Pass. Little José crossed the border every morning to the English-speaking world and to school. Thus early in life he came into contact with the gringo, as fair as he was dark, morally fair also through some congenital goodness or perhaps simply a dearth of Latin imagination.

There were friends, there were fights, and, whereas the Anglo-Saxon could get the better of him with fists, José found that he could put anyone to flight with the dramatic twirl of a penknife. At baseball he was mediocre, best as fielder, which meant that he searched for lost balls. That biracial and bilingual education molded his future. From his first job as certified court translator of English documents, he rose to junior member of the legal firm of Warner, Johnston, and Galston, defending before Mexican courts American mine and oil interests. Meanwhile, as unofficial ambassador for the political underdog, he lobbied in Washington for the recognition of revolutionary causes and, during low ebbs, lived in New York or in California as a political exile. This career, geographically and organically entwined with the life of the northern neighbor, became the contrasting foundation upon which Vasconcelos came to build, much later, his excitable doctrine of Hispanicism as an exercise in escape.

When he was less than ten years old, José gave first proof of the beaver instinct that was to characterize his era in power. Describing the patio of his house, he wrote:

> In the most sheltered corner I leveled an area of a few square meters, staked the design of foundations with pickets and ropes, dug ditches, and filled them with a mixture of stone rubble, sand, and lime. I provided myself with small blocks of pressed and sun-dried earth and started building.... I managed to erect an armature of cigar-box wood to support the still fresh material of the many arches that embellished the first tier. In the second I opened wide windows on overhanging balconies, capping the whole with a light third floor. The many months of labor that the work meant assured my fame in the community. Children and grownups flocked to see it. Father insisted on a formal inauguration and furnished bundles of Chinese firecrackers, sweets, and refreshments; but my only care was that nobody should touch or endanger this marvel.[1]

1. *Ulises Criollo* (Mexico, Botas, 1935), p. 17.

After a stay at the Campeche Institute, following a shift in his father's post, he went to the capital to study at the Preparatoria School and later at the law school, housed in what was to one day become a wing of his ministry. This early intimacy with both buildings must have encouraged him to treat them both as guinea pigs on which to test his philosophico-social theories when the time came for those experiments in mural painting that no poll of the public would have countenanced.

Bred on the orthodoxy of Comtist positivism, young Vasconcelos was one of the founders of an "Atheneum of Youth." Here adolescent thinkers, including Antonio Caso, Alfonso Reyes, and Pedro Henríquez Ureña, met and conversed, eager to reassay the spiritual currency that their masters, Barreda, Sierra, and Parra, had demonetized. With a flair for beauty inbred in his race, the young philosopher freed himself of materialism by clinging to aesthetics. But politics took him away from philosophy. At twenty-six an intimate of Madero, director of the anti-Díaz newspaper *Anti-reelectionist,* a suspect watched by Díaz's political police, then successively unofficial ambassador in Washington for the revolution, wealthy lawyer in Mexico under a triumphant Madero, refugee in the United States after Madero's assassination; at first feted, then jailed by President Carranza, escaping by the classical means of knotted bed sheets, Vasconcelos rode the dizzy wheel of revolutionary fortunes at breath-taking speed.

He first became Minister of Education under Eulalio Gutiérrez, ex-dynamiter elected President of the Republic by the Sovereign Military Convention of Aguascalientes on November 6, 1914. Carranza, self-styled "First Chief of the Revolution," chose to sulk in Vera Cruz when Gutiérrez entered his capital, and Zapatistas and Villistas, thirty thousand strong, paraded their allegiance under the presidential balcony. Still it was a shaky throne. Seventy thousand pesos a day was Zapata's price for protection, and Villa's idiosyncrasies could not be curbed at any price.

Having taken the oath of office in everyday clothes, Vasconcelos took possession of the ministry with rustic simplicity: "The elderly janitor proving too slow for my impatience, I rushed up, taking the

stairs two by two, and proceeded to force an entrance with kicks and blows."[2]

Mexico City was then a military camp weakly policed. In his own words, President Gutiérrez was "totally lacking in the executive means to enforce arrest on personages who had at their command thousands of men." His own life was in jeopardy: "On the afternoon of Sunday December 27, General Villa violated my private domicile, pistol in hand, with a bodyguard of eight or ten ... insulting me and preferring various charges." Some of his collaborators had already fallen. On December 7: "General Guillermo García Aragón, vice-president of the permanent commission of the convention and chamberlain of the presidential palace, was arrested by forces of General Villa at the suggestion of General Zapata... and shot without any process of law whatsoever." Cabinet members were not immune: "A deal is known by which General Villa agrees to surrender General Lucio Blanco, Secretary of the Interior ... to be shot by General Zapata, who has for some time been fancying his head. General Zapata expressed a similar desire concerning Councillor Vasconcelos, Secretary of Public Instruction."[3] The mustachioed chieftain coveted the portfolio of education for his mentor, General Otilio Montaño, who had drawn up the basic charter of *Zapatismo.* Loath to gratify Zapata's desire, however worthy the candidate for his secretaryship, Vasconcelos escaped assassins only by changing his residence every night.

An official attempt at peaceful pursuits, a New Year's banquet proffered by the President to the diplomatic corps, turned into a Nebuchadnezzar's feast. Pancho Villa graced it unexpectedly, stiff in a gold-embroidered general's uniform, and Emiliano Zapata came too, nonchalantly lining bristling bodyguards along the walls of the festive hall. Spunkily enough, foreign diplomats and important Mexicans bandied slightly quaking repartees over champagne flutes. A news photographer caught elbow to elbow Vasconcelos, Villa,

2. *La Tormenta* (Mexico, Botas, 1936), p. 210.

3. Eulalio Gutiérrez, "Capital Edict of Supreme Justice Demoting the Generals Francisco Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and Venustiano Carranza"; reprinted in *La Tormenta,* and in F. Ramírez Plancarte, *La Ciudad de México durante la revolución constitucionalista,* Botas, Mexico, 1941.

Gutiérrez, and Zapata, busy with chicken and asparagus, while in the background Otilio Montaño stands waiting, as it were, for his turn (Fig. 14).

Unable to cope with his executive handicap any longer, President Gutiérrez proclaimed on January 13, 1915, a most courageous "Capital Edict of Supreme Justice Demoting the Generals Francisco Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and Venustiano Carranza." Having thus outlawed, *de jure*. friends and foe, and arraigned against himself the three most potent armies in the field, Gutiérrez stealthily rode out of Mexico City, an outlaw *de facto*.

As his edict was being pasted on the walls of the capital, the President left with a small escort that included Vasconcelos, spurred and khaki-clad, and with 10,453,473 pesos, the contents of the national coffers. In the saddle all day, the men slept in the open whenever skirmishes with hostile scouts let them sleep. Rank and amenities were forgotten. To feed himself and his de luxe *soldadera*, the Secretary of Education was obliged to scuffle with privates for tortillas.

As a lawyer proved to be dead weight in military adventures, Gutiérrez sent Vasconcelos and a handful of men toward Washington to plead for recognition, if and once they got there. A short but heroic rush to the Rio Grande, and stealthy night-ferrying, got this tiny group of *convencionistas* on the United States side of the river, within earshot of the firing squad who massacred their overtaken rear guard.

Bathed, shaved, changed from dripping khaki to a business suit with padded shoulders, Vasconcelos proceeded north to plead before William Jennings Bryan the legality of his cause. But Wilson ruled for Carranza. Meanwhile, a deserted, wounded Gutiérrez abdicated, and the Secretary minus a President was left stranded in New York. Vasconcelos put this unrequited political pause to good spiritual use. In the Forty-second Street Public Library "I glutted myself on the works of the Fathers of the Church and Alexandrian Gnosticism." And again: "Greek philosophy became my 'patria.'"[4] He then completed his Pitágoras, first published in Cuba in 1916.[5]

4. *Tormenta*, p. 344.
5. *Pitágoras*, Havana, 1916. The second edition, Mexico, 1921, is cited throughout.

Vasconcelos remained a roving exile from 1915 to 1920. In Mexico thrifty First Chief Carranza, intent on decentralization, mutilated and eventually suppressed the Ministry of Education. General Obregón, wearying of his allegiance to Carranza, went to the United States to enlist Vasconcelos into the coming fray, promising that "he would not remain dissatisfied." A political mouthpiece once again, Vasconcelos wrote tracts that backed the budding revolt with keen lawyer's logic. The defection of Obregón, with his Yaqui Indian warriors, soon tipped the scales against the President. Carranza's flight was stopped short by bullets that froze him in the straw of a stable where he slept. Refugees in the United States were again on top.

The day after the murder: "A special coach ... took us to the capital ... Obregón waiting at the station ... dined us in the upper salon of Café Colón. While he was mixing cocktails of his own concoction, the talk turned to the corpse. 'That clears the situation,' volunteered Obregón."[6] Then Vasconcelos billed him hard, if circuitously, for all the years of exile. "Speaking of openings," he said, "I confess that I feel cheated. The only portfolio I want is Education and it is no more. In case you want to know, that would have been my bid, as in the days of Eulalio."[7]

Closest to his wish was the presidency of the university. Vasconcelos received it in June 1920. In his acceptance speech he said:

> It is with sadness that I reach this mound of debris of what was once a ministry intent on steering education along the ways of modern culture. The crassest ignorance has passed here, smiting and annihilating, rotting and maiming, until at last there remains at the helm of our national education only this petty department that I come to head today.... The post would be decorative if the aimlessness of its functions did not render it ridiculous. It would be criminal if the laws that created it were not plainly stupid. To police the slow routine of three or four professional schools, to dust cobwebs from passé monuments is

6. *Tormenta*, p. 568.
7. Ibid., p. 570.

> repellent to an active soul.... The task of bestowing doctors' tassels on famed foreign visitors, and presiding over venerable councils that do not do a penny's worth of good in regard to social needs cannot fulfill my ambition.... No fruitful result in public education can be obtained unless a federal ministry of public instruction be created.[8]

To make such a ministry legal, and metamorphose his mortarboard into a portfolio, meant a constitutional amendment that required in turn a quorum approval from the twenty-eight state legislatures. Undaunted, the new president of the university became a "traveling salesman of culture" and embarked on a nationwide tour to woo the provinces with all the zest of a primaries candidate bent on dazzling rural voters. With him came a band to break the news of his arrival with free concerts on the plaza. He brought "for orators, Antonio Caso and Gómez Robelo, for ambassador of painting, Montenegro; Carlos Pellicer and Jaime Torres Bodet quenched the thirst for poetry dormant in Mexican crowds."[9] Three months of cultural circus antics assured the quorum. Created by presidential decree on July 25, 1921, the ministry was approved by Congress on October 2 and Vasconcelos became its head on October 10.

In 1915, in the days of Eulalio Gutiérrez, he was known as the Secretary on Horseback. "'*El Indio,*' a medium-sized stallion, with dark lustrous coat and sensitive nostrils,"[10] somehow fitted this perilous, informal, and martial era. But in 1921 it was a beribboned Obregón in full dress who swore in an equally white-tie'd Vasconcelos. The post called for no more horsemanship than the riding of a swivel chair. The period of reconstruction had begun.

The minister had seen big while planning his ministry. The funds he asked for and received were twice the amount at the disposal of education under Madero, thrice the budget of matchless Justo Sierra, back in the days of Porfiro Díaz. True, previous ministries had left the bulk of education to the states, limiting their own jurisdic-

8. In *Boletín de la Universidad,* 1 (1920), 548.
9. Vasconcelos, *El Desastre* (Mexico, Botas, 1938), pp. 1–2.
10. Vasconcelos, *Tormenta,* p. 251.

tion to the federal district and territories. Mexico had now for the first time a Ministry of Education truly federal in scope. To house this newborn giant, Vasconcelos launched a building program as early as June 1921, that is, five months before he became secretary: "My day began at 7 A.M.; at 8:00 I was surveying the works, climbing scaffolds, urging speed, taking note of what materials were needed, to insure quick delivery. At 9 A.M. I reached my offices, spattered with lime."[11]

The day that Vasconcelos took the oath of office, a reporter for *El Universal,* reviewing his qualifications, quoted his words: "If Genius has such an exalted standing it is because of its capacity to serve the people best!" and added: "We see that our brand-new Secretary of Instruction is not a partisan of art for art's sake."[12] Vasconcelos remarked later: "One of the imperatives of our program was to put the public in contact with great artists rather than with mediocrities."[13] His prime interest remained music and poetry, his favorite artists the contralto Fanny Anitúa and the *diseuse* Bertha Singermann. But the plastic arts were also well fostered. He had predefined the characteristics of the mural painting yet to come in a lecture, speaking of a theoretical Creole art: "An art saturated with primitive vigor, new subject matter, combining subtlety and intensity, sacrificing the exquisite to the great, perfection to invention."[14]

Never before had a patron professed such respect for the artists he hired. Their advice was sought not only in matters pertaining to their craft but also on most others:

> Rivera, Montenegro, Enciso, the sculptors, and all who have been instrumental in the works of the Ministry, have not done so as intruders but because I begged them to and insisted that they do so.... The painters who advised me most usefully have done so without recompense. I often felt ashamed to be unable to give them their due. Yet I made use of them continually,

11. *Desastre,* p. 100.
12. *El Universal,* Oct. 11, 1921.
13. *Desastre,* p. 172.
14. Quoted by Renato Molina Enríquez, "La Decoración de Diego Rivera en la Preparatoria," *El Universal Ilustrado,* March 22, 1923.

> asking and begging for their help in such manner that in every case I was the petitioner and they the petitioned.[15]

When his extensive building program was criticized for being planned with the help of artists, he answered: "It is my conviction that many of our present and modest architectural endeavors will be remembered thanks to the painters who have decorated them. Architects should feel elated at their good fortune at working in the midst of an artistic renaissance."[16] Not only did the painters help the Secretary to plot the architecture, they also frescoed the buildings. It became usual to see the scaffolding of the mural painter erected side by side with that of the mason.

Far from bringing political credit to the headstrong Secretary, his art program became the butt of derisive jokes, as the problem of government patronage of the arts stirred a skeptical public: "Bluff is the word written on the studio door of each one of those fashionable artists who climb the steps of a certain infatuated Secretary.... The official backing that artists of the caliber of Roberto Montenegro and Adolfo Best receive can foster only ridicule."[17]

Official enthusiasm was also lacking. Small as it was, the expense allotted to art and artists had to be camouflaged under fake heading, before chancing the approval of a congress whose heart was lost to the military. Why did the Secretary, a seasoned politico, launch his art program on such a scale, when he knew it to be irrelevant and even inimical to his political well-being? The answer lies deep within his subconscious, a puzzle that an analysis of his political and official activities fails to solve.

As he found himself caught in the grueling friction of Mexican political millstones, hunted as a fugitive one week and exalted as cabinet member the next, Vasconcelos preserved an inner sanctum of detachment in the face of his own adventures. The young philosopher never felt committed to the revolution on the same terms as

15. "Los pintores y la arquitectura," *El Universal*, May 3, 1924; reprinted in *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*, 2 (1924), 547–50.
16. Ibid.
17. Vera de Córdova, "Ramos Martínez y la Escuela de Coyoacán," *Revista de Revistas*, Feb. 25, 1923.

his fellow reformers. Slogans and platforms that were inflaming his world, Zapata's call for land answered by the sardonic "bread and onions" of Victoriano Huerta, were but picturesque clothing of Marxian economic concepts repellent to this unusual revolutionist.

In his *Pitágoras* there is a curious passage that is obviously autobiographical in the guise of an historical comment:

> Today the economic problem is deemed paramount and all that is not narrowly its kin is relegated to the background and threatened with neglect and destruction. As the disciples of Pythagoras were once suspected of political aristocratism, so today those who pursue in science, art, or philosophy ends foreign to material comfort are branded as parasites and foes of the people.... Those aware of this huddle in their Academies to converse and to think. At times of major calamities, when intolerance runs amuck, such men scatter, lose themselves among other men, and behind the disguise of an employment or of a position live isolated, hidden, too timorous, as it were, to acknowledge their divine mania.[18]

Thus does philosopher Vasconcelos berate this "major calamity," the revolution, of which as politician he was an active cog. The fate of the disciples of Pythagoras parallels that of the founders of the Atheneum of Youth, Ureña, Caso, and himself. But the young thinkers still found ways "to acknowledge their divine mania." In Mexico City, Caso, with superb disregard for the charred corpses, the stink, the hunger, the riots, and the cross fires of the military, published his *Philosophical Problems* in June 1915. Disguised as everything from cabinet member to jailbird, Vasconcelos conceived his *Pitágoras* and wrote it that same year in New York, a political exile.

The originality of this key work of his philosophical system resides in the application of an aesthetic synthesis to the theory of numbers that commentators of the Greek philosopher interpret rather in terms of mathematics. The spark that set off that concept was Porphyry's casual comment that Pythagoras would fall into

18. *Pitágoras*, p. 23.

deep cogitations inspired by the noisy beat of a neighboring smith's hammer. Vasconcelos explains:

> The intermittent pitch of the stricken metal awakens strange echoes in the philosopher's consciousness as if, each time that the anvil releases its clangor into space, his soul reverberated the noise. In like way does the lyre's string vibrate in sympathy each time that a neighboring string is plucked.

From the anvil struck by the hammer the meditation turns to music:

> The secret of art ... consists in freeing matter from the dictates of necessity, imparting to it by the means of contemplation a motion of irregular cadence, inverse from that imposed by natural mechanics. The musician communicates to matter, to the vibrant catgut, to the hollow cane, the pitch and breath of this shifting, tremulous thing that dwells in the depth of the human "I"...
>
> In music as in all legitimate art, matter adopts rhythms opposed to the Newtonian and similar to the Pythagorean. All this obscure doctrine of an aesthetic rhythm seems to me clarified if we state: Nature is governed in the factual order by the Newtonian law of causality, and in the spiritual order by the Pythagorean rhythm, disinterested and beautiful.[19]

A statesman as well as a philosopher, Vasconcelos was bound to let both activities overlap. A lecture he gave on September 10, 1921, on "The Law of Three States of Society" conjures up a society molded by natural laws that imply Pythagorean concepts:

> Not only the individual soul, but the collective soul, passes through evolutionary periods of progressive dynamism. A quick synthetic survey shows men organized at first into tribes whose collective law is strength.... From the first emerges the martial type dominated by material interests and unfit for a superior life.... A second period follows ... in which internal organization and international relations are based on conven-

19. Ibid., pp. 57–8, 72–3.

> ience and planning.... In this second period ... intelligence affirms its superiority over the irreflectiveness of brute strength ... yet this state is still not supreme. Higher than the fatalities of logic and all material and moral interest, there lingers in our consciousness the desire to act freely, at one with our sympathies. When this urge will become reality ... the third state of society will have been reached, to wit the aesthetic period.[20]

In the course of his revolutionary career Vasconcelos had collided somewhat roughly with the first state of society where force rules, and had incurred the mortal enmity of the primitive martial type. As Secretary of Education, with the whole of Mexico to play upon, he felt a temptation to skip over the second intellectualist period, typified in our day by the United States, and to usher the Republic directly into the third glorious aesthetic state.

Here again Pythagoras shapes the methodology of his statesmanship:

> Conceiving that men are more malleable when approached through their senses, as happens when one contemplates beautiful forms and figures, or hears beautiful rhythms and melodies, he [Pythagoras] decreed that the initiation should be through music, since certain given melodies and rhythms possess therapeutic properties to cure the passions and routines of men. So records Iamblicus, commenting on the life of his master.[21]

How could Vasconcelos doubt the practical wisdom of this discipline when the melodies of a band, the rhythm of Torres Bodet's poems, and the beautiful forms of Montenegro's paintings had just assured the legislative quorum that put him into office? What softened provincial Solons could recast the collective soul of Mexico as well.

To further such a scheme, artists were paramount. Whereas men guided by reason, scientists, engineers, even philosophers could build only society's intellect, men like musicians, poets, and painters

20. In *Boletín*, 2 (1923), 17.
21. *Pitágoras*, p. 13.

were already on the aesthetic plane toward which the educator could aspire only as a glorious consummation.

This theory was also reflected in the unbounded freedom enjoyed by the commissioned artists. Much official painting was brushed in the world before Vasconcelos; but the Maecenas always imposed a theme and too often a style as well. To remain Pythagorean, art must be acted in full liberty and its end must, in Poussin's words, "be delectation." Harnessed to the chariot of a political cause, its flight weighted by aesthetic censure, art becomes mechanical and falls to the Newtonian level. Under penalty of nullifying his aims, the Secretary could impose neither subject matter nor style. It was therefore his bad luck that the group of artists he took to pasture were mostly tired of artistic license and eager to rehabilitate didactic painting. For once artists and patron found themselves paradoxically at odds on reverse platforms. Yet in spite of their ill-attuned minds, painters remained an essential ingredient of the new cultural program. The building of palaces and schools that answered no more than a utilitarian purpose could never constitute the highest aim.

At the peak of his material success when the new Ministry was completed, Vasconcelos did not fail to mention in his inaugural speech "this discordant music to the sound of which cathedrals were built,"[22] the irregular beat of chisels and hammers that struck his ear as he sat at his desk in the building in construction. This parallel between himself and his master, who meditated best while the neighboring smith labored, shows that Vasconcelos never relinquished his philosophical approach. By means more essential than material progress, he meant to soothe men's tempers with beautiful melodies and rhythms—in this case free public concerts—and to train men to the exercise of contemplation by forcing upon their eyes beautiful shapes and figures—in this case mural painting. Far from being decorative frills on a substantial architecture, frescoes were to Vasconcelos a substantial means to expedite the coming of the Pythagorean millennium.

22. In *Boletín*, 1 (1922), 5.

CHAPTER 8

Murals in the Former Church and Convent of San Pedro y San Pablo

Vasconcelos became president of the university on the tacit understanding that he would soon head a newly created Ministry of Education. During the transition period, when the ministry "was born but not baptized,"[1] he looked for artists and for walls, two major ingredients of his intended renaissance.

The artistic panorama that greeted his eye in June 1920 was far different from what it was soon to be, a fact to be remembered when we try to understand his early choices. Besides recognized local masters—Atl, Martínez, Best, Montenegro—there were Mexican expatriates—Zárraga, Rivera, De Zayas—whose works, however, were intentionally a parcel of the international output, with little or no reach as yet into their own country. Of the men whose names are now linked to Mexican fresco, the second half of 1920 found Rivera in Italy, Siqueiros and De la Cueva in Spain, and me in Paris, back from the military occupation of the Rhineland. Orozco lived in Mexico City, or rather Coyoacán, but his fame, based on razor-sharp cartoons contributed to opposition sheets and gay weeklies, was hardly meant to encourage official patronage.

Vasconcelos bravely hitched his wagon to the star of the trend-of-the-day in art—nationalism. Regardless of its aesthetic value, the use that nationalism made of Mexicana promised to smooth out some anticipated difficulties. Philosophically speaking, lines, colors, proportions, and rhythms, regardless of subject matter, were tools,

1. Vasconcelos, *Desastre*, p. 30.

with which to forge an ideal state of society. Practically speaking, national themes for the projected decorations might ease the way to a payroll for the painters, and smother adverse grumblings under the scream of the Mexican eagle.

The first aesthetic decision taken by the new president of the university was to pick a retinue of musicians, poets, and artists to pad his political campaign tour through the interior with culture. His first stylistic decision was the choice of an "ambassador of painting": Montenegro. The choice was natural enough. Since his return to Mexico in 1919, Montenegro figured as *chef d'école*, a rank that he retained undisputed until Rivera's own return in mid-1921. The most discussed members of his group of young followers were Gabriel Fernández Ledesma and Rufino Tamayo. Montenegro coached the younger artists on how to "clothe the Indian spirit with European trappings," as critic Vera de Córdova once phrased it.[2]

Vasconcelos dates the beginnings of the renaissance from this political trip: "In Colima, Montenegro and Ledesma painted water colors of *tuba* [a refreshment made of palm sap] peddlers and other folk types with local backgrounds. These ingenious works are the first of a long line of folk themes that later became a fashion."[3]

With his mind set on murals, Vasconcelos needed walls. His future ministry was still "a mound of debris"[4] with two years of work ahead to put it into architectural shape. Before he dared disturb the imposing eighteenth-century patios of the Regal College of San Ildefonso, he felt it wiser to try out his idea on a less hallowed place. A compromise step toward fulfilling his plan was to wed the brush of Montenegro to the walls of the former Church of San Pedro y San Pablo.

The cluster of buildings, originally a convent and its adjoining chapel, had been subject since the days of Independence to many an odd use.[5] In June 1920 it was military property. Vasconcelos "interviewed the Secretary of War and within twenty-four hours had the

2. Córdova, in a review of the San Carlos show, *El Universal*, Nov. 1, 1922.
3. *Desastre*, p. 22.
4. Vasconcelos, speech on inauguration of Ministry, *Boletín*, 1 (1922), 5.
5. See *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*, 2 (1923), 701.

orders needed to occupy the building."[6] He then proceeded "to transform the church into a lecture hall, to repair the vaulted ceiling and cleanse the walls. The job was put in the hands of the artists Roberto Montenegro and Jorge Enciso."[7]

Enciso confined himself to advising the architect concerning floors and the entrance door. He also lent an ancient decorated *batea* to serve as an inspiration for the painted garlands. The rest of the decoration was left to the care of Montenegro, including murals and stained-glass windows.

The Secretary must have felt fortified in his choice when the one-man show of easel paintings that Montenegro opened at the San Carlos Academy on June 6, 1921, proved an outstanding success. President-elect Obregón attended, as well as Secretary of Foreign Relations and art collector Pani, and, of course, Vasconcelos. One reporter praised the "portraits of high society ladies."[8] More sophisticated, critic Gómez Robelo described the same sitters as "d'Annunzioesque."[9] The main interest was focused on Mexican subjects painted in the new style. Alfonso Cravioto exclaimed: "A triumphant climax is the cartoon for a stained-glass window that unrolls with thoughtful balance all the picturesqueness of the most genuine among our dances."[10] He was referring to the jarabe tapatio, a tap dance with trimmings, which for certain city folk combines the leg art of a floor show with the uplift of the national anthem, the same dance that had nauseated Clemente Orozco.

After the exhibition the cartoon that Cravioto praised was turned over to the master craftsman Don Enrique Villaseñor to be translated into stained glass. Chronologically the window heads the list of art works commissioned by Vasconcelos. In his opinion it rated a special unveiling.

On September 8, 1921, braving the plaster dust raised by masons finishing vaults and walls, and inching their way through a forest of

6. *Desastre*, pp. 32–3.
7. Vasconcelos, in *Boletín*, 1 (1922), 484.
8. *Revista de Revistas*, June 5, 1921.
9. *México Moderno*, Nov. 1921.
10. *El Universal*, June 1, 1921.

scaffoldings, Vasconcelos and a small group of intimates gathered to gaze at the stained glass *in situ*. They saw:

> The *china poblana* with her skirts of red baize and the silky rebozo de Santa María that spirals around her body in action. Peeking from behind her, the malicious features of the classic charro. Musicians pluck local instruments, a small harp, a fat guitar, a *vihuela*... In the background is a colonial church and a village street, redolent of the poetry of our provinces.[11]

To the newsmen present, President Vasconcelos volunteered the facts that the expense involved was only 3,500 pesos, that the sum had been paid to a Mexican craftsman, and that the cost would have been many times higher had the work been executed by a foreign firm. This was no casual remark. Until then, a revolutionary had been obvious enough, with his riding togs, Mexican hat, cartridge belt, bandoliers of cartridges, and pistols. But the regime was settling down into offices, business suits, and swivel chairs, and it was increasingly difficult to separate the goats from the sheep. The dictatorship of Díaz had not been as ignorant of art as was now assumed, having commissioned Dr. Atl to design the gigantic curtain of the national opera house, a million pieces of *favrile* glass covering 2,500 square feet, beside which Montenegro's lunette shrinks. Eager to differentiate his revolutionary offering from that of the dictator, made ten years before, Vasconcelos could only seize on the fact that Atl's curtain had been executed by Tiffany in New York at great cost.

In September 1921 Mexico City was in the throes of the centennial celebrations; from the first to the thirtieth the official program listed no less than one hundred and thirteen events, mostly inaugurations. As every pretext was made to count, one can understand how in the same building the bare nave planted with scaffolds came to be inaugurated a week after the unveiling of one of its windows: "September 14, 5 P.M., the President of the University will inaugurate the auditorium of the former barracks of San Pedro y San Pablo, and unveil the statue of Dante, gift of the Italian colony."[12]

11. Julio Torri, "San Pedro y San Pablo," *Azulejos*, 1, 1922.
12. *Revista de Revistas*, Sept. 11, 1921.

Despite the successive unveilings, the decoration was still far from finished. Hopes were expressed in May 1922 that "Don Roberto Montenegro and Jorge Enciso ... will soon offer to the public the fruit of their labors."[13] By September 1922 the auditorium "lacks only benches to be open to the public."[14]

The absidial wall was painted in oils with "The Dance of the Hours" as a theme. It was the first mural to be commissioned by Vasconcelos, who proudly stated in his memoirs: "Montenegro started there the movement of Mexican Painting that later transcended national boundaries and is today an accepted United States practice."[15] The claim could be shrugged off by Jorge Enciso, whose two friezes on Mexican themes date from a decade earlier, but it is true that his were an isolated effort, soon destroyed and forgotten, while the commission given to Montenegro ushers in the unbroken cycle of government-sponsored mural painting that is still part of our present after forty years.

"We could not think of anything to represent," admitted Vasconcelos, "so I gave the painter a Goethian asininity for a theme: 'Action is mightier than fate. Conquer!'"[16]

The work was conceived in the gentle aesthetic calm that preceded the impending plastic storm. Murals still implied allegories of females wrapped in cheesecloth, cut to suit official taste the world over. The wall displayed twelve ladies thus attired, meant to be Hours, capering decorously around an armored knight who leans against a Persian tree of life gay with giant blooms and chirping birds, on a gold background. To link this somewhat incongruous illustration with the intended theme, Goethe's quotation is prominently displayed (Fig. 15).

Though commissioned long before, the panel was painted in 1922. In May Julio Torri reports in *Azulejos*: "Montenegro is working on the cartoon of the center decoration which promises to be splendid and of unmatched sumptuousness." A photograph of a corner of the artist's studio, with its walls pinned with charcoal studies of the

13. *Boletín*, 1 (1922), 484.
14. Ibid., pp. 312–15.
15. *Desastre*, p. 35.
16. Ibid.

female Hours, illustrates his comment. Work was interrupted on July 21, when Vasconcelos left to represent Mexico at Brazil's Centennial Fair, along with Montenegro as the delegate of Mexico City's Cultural Board. The painter was back in Mexico in September, and the panel was finished soon after. News photographs showing the artist standing before the finished wall appear at the end of October.

Montenegro had left the decoration of the nave to the skilled hand of Xavier Guerrero, an artist who knew from infancy the intricate craft of house and sign painting, it being his father's business. To help him on the job, the tapatio Xavier brought craftsman Hermilio Ximénez from Guadalajara. They realized between them the lovely glue-tempera décor of pomegranates, bluebirds, blackbirds, cornflowers, and camellias that garland the domes, arches, and pilasters.

This work, unique of its kind at that time in Mexico, at first aroused great hope. Even as it progressed, however, the star of the nationalists was quickly fading. In 1922 gusts of a premonitory wind started blowing; for a few painters, mural painting had already become less polite, darker, and sturdier than in 1920. Always sensitive to meteorology, Montenegro, feeling the shift in taste, set his heart on more serious pursuits even before "The Dance of the Hours" was completed.

The muralists with a social ax to grind proved unjust to this transitional work. In 1923 Rivera dismissed the whole nationalist effort and Montenegro's mural in a sentence: "When I arrived here two years ago ... besides the Coyoacán group, there was only the decorative trend known as nationalist, meaning that the walls of San Pedro y San Pablo were beginning to be 'potted.' Best Maugard worked at home alone, and that was about all."[17]

Araujo elaborated on Rivera's pun:

> For the purpose of decorating walls ... they rely on the décor of folk pottery, forgetting that, to learn how to do a thing, one should observe works done of similar material and with similar function. To paint walls one must study the mural tradition

17. "De Pintura," *La Falange*, Aug. 1, 1923.

> instead of hoping to discover the secrets of this very specialized trade in a national jug.... The muralist who follows this method acquires the same knack of speedy improvisation with which a pot is curlicued.[18]

Despite ill-humored criticisms, the decoration of the Church of San Pedro y San Pablo remains a worthy apotheosis of the nationalist tendencies, of the return to "Our Own" voiced in other quarters by Ramos Martínez, Atl, and Adolfo Best.

While the redecorated chapel was to be used, at least potentially, as "a lecture hall and movie house for the poor,"[19] the adjoining convent was remade into an annex of the Preparatoria School, and its residential quarters and open patios, cut for monastic walks, were groomed to receive students.

The drastic reconstruction began in about June 1921 and lasted for two years. According to Vasconcelos:

> We raised the present Annex of the Preparatoria School from ancient patios half crumbling and clogged with debris. It proved necessary to move tons of earth to recover the stone columns of the first court. A single row of arches still stood in the second court.... We built the three other sides to match, the whole resulting in one of the handsomest patios of the Capital.[20]

Without waiting for the masons to leave or for the plaster to dry, Vasconcelos had asked Gerardo Murillo, alias Dr. Atl, to decorate the walls of the handsome patio.

When speaking of the Academy of San Carlos, we had left Atl encamped in Orizaba with a group of Carranza faithfuls, while President Eulalio Gutiérrez, propped up by Villa and Zapata, held Mexico City. Soon after, in 1915, Atl rode back into the capital with the victory-flushed Yaquis of Obregón on the same January day that the last beaten hordes of Zapata left it. In an ugly mood Obregón arrested and deported clerical hostages to Vera Cruz and put

18. "El Movimiento," IV, *El Demócrata,* Aug. 2, 1923.

19. Torri, "San Pedro." I doubt that such a philanthropic intention was ever put into practice.

20. *Desastre,* p. 33.

Spanish businessmen to cleaning the streets under armed guards. Following suit, Atl, heading "red" battalions of workers, opened churches for them to sack.

By 1921 Atl's fury had nearly subsided. "Thrown by the furious waves of politics on the calm sands of art," he opened in January a one-man show of his landscapes with a lecture on the mildly disquieting theme, "The Art of Drawing in the Closing Phase of Bourgeois Culture." A suspicious reporter noted that the good doctor "raises his index finger with the apostolic gesture of a Lenin," and quoted his words: "A revolution is needed in art, a revolution is on its way, that will make of painting something dynamic, instead of the static thing that our ancestors knew."[21]

Atl's mural proceeded concurrently with the reconstruction of the building. Secretary Vasconcelos watched its execution *en passant*, drawn to the school by matters more pressing than art: "I went daily to the Annex because of the unfinished sanitation works. For the first time in its history, the school was endowed with quasi-luxurious toilets American style."

Once on the spot, "I paced the second court with Atl, discussing waves and Nipponese panoramas."[22]

Atl was just putting on the last touches in August 1923, when Crispin described the mural:

> The first panel is entitled "The Beautiful Wrath of the Sea." Between this delicate combination of lines and colors and the following panel surges the triangular figure of a woman.... Next is a seascape noteworthy for its color, "Night over the Sea" ... then another seascape ... an étude in blues courageously solved, called "The Inlet." In between are symbolical figures of men in Venetian red.... Then, this magician of pigments has a painting in unusual and puzzling style entitled "Waves and Breakers." Near it ... "Swells of the Sea," and in the following panel another symbol "The Rain" in a range of ochres.... Making haste past the panel called "Mozumba," we

21. Quoted in *El Universal Ilustrado*, Jan. 20, 1921.
22. *Desastre*, pp. 202–3.

> reach the most notable picture "Impact of Two Waves" in vigorous contrast with "Night," a dawnless night.[23]

Leaving a salty tang, this description reminds us also that, pious after a fashion, anticlerical Atl "had learned to kneel before the daily miracle of a night dripping with constellations."[24]

Ernest Gruening spread the fame of the work in English as early as February 1924: "Dr. Atl, painter and author, is coloring the wall with flaming depictions of Mexican scenery—tropical nights with a million colored stars, blue surf under orange billowed clouds pounding against red rock."[25]

Rivera disliked Atl at the time, sizing him up as "a scarecrow dolled up in the rags of a busted politico, gesturing aimlessly. The young painters know that under the pompous sheen the bald pate is stuffed with straw, and not even the quack's beard succeeds in putting them to flight."[26]

Rivera liked Atl's mural even less than he liked Atl, believing "its shapes and lines dictated by an undiluted Yankee taste of the fiftieth category." As for its technique, Atl's own invention, baptized "Atl-colors": "The walls, rebelling in their stony subconsciousness, forbid adherence to the coal tar dyes (soaked in gasoline) meant to cover them for the solace of those who grow a pair of fried eggs *en lieu* of ocular globes."[27]

Nor did the school inmates take kindly to the work. Crispin remarked: "The decorations start high, but only thus could they escape the collaboration with student's pencils." The precaution proved insufficient, however, the walls being the first of a long line of our murals to be stoned and maimed.

Revolutionary to the marrow, Atl thrived on all opposition. Crispin noted: "The Doctor tells us: 'Those paintings do not please laymen, who do not understand them; they do not please those who commissioned them either; nor do they please artists, who

23. "Letras y monos," *El Universal,* Aug. 3, 1923.
24. *El Universal Ilustrado,* Jan. 20, 1921.
25. "The Mexican Renaissance," *Century Magazine,* Feb. 1924.
26. "Arte pictórico," *El Demócrata,* March 2, 1924.
27. "Dos Años," *Azulejos,* Dec. 1923.

find them dynamic to excess. So that I am the only one they please.'"

The choicest walls of the annex were those of the vast well of the main stairway. Again the plum fell to Montenegro, who this time tried his hand at *buon fresco*. His subject was "The Feast of the Holy Cross," which commemorates the discovery of the True Cross by Empress Saint Helena; on that day masons hoist improvised beribbonned crosses to the tops of buildings under construction, and fireworks and firecrackers are used lavishly.

The earlier "Dance of the Hours" was in the nature of an enlarged illumination, its elements knitted flat, symmetrical in relation to the median axis. Montenegro had heard meanwhile the appeal of Siqueiros: "We painters should superimpose the constructive spirit over the merely decorative," and had watched the making of murals that heeded this call. His fresco is composed in depth, with volumes in place of outlines, with a corset of obvious geometry that sharply contrasts with the oriental calligraphy of the earlier work. Marking the increasingly serious approach of the painter to mural painting, the main subject is no longer a romantic knight but the painter's own scaffold.

While a mural is in the making, the uprights and successive levels of a working scaffold divide its surface, framing it within their superimposed constructiveness. Disillusion often follows once this flattering armature is taken down and the maker has the first unobstructed view of his work. Here the theme itself required the painting of scaffolds around unfinished masonries. Montenegro projected the muralist's scaffold into a painted one, and the composition is measurably strengthened by the verticals and horizontals of the painted timber. Charros and chinas—a lingering touch of nationalism—still flavor the cubistic device (Fig. 16).

This, Montenegro's first fresco, has been sometimes confused with his first Mexican mural and as a result dated 1921–22. Adding to the confusion there is a later addition of lateral panels, signed and dated 1931. The divided critical opinion concerning the value of the work is based on this discrepancy of a decade in date. If it had been painted in 1921–22, "The Feast of the Cross" would mean a paramount step toward the formation of a Mexican style and of a mural techni-

que. If painted in 1931, it would constitute a rather weak rear guard to the frescoes that came before. As we shall see, it is neither.

"The Feast of the Cross" can be dated quite accurately. A reporter for *El Universal* described the building in June 1923: "Yesterday we paid a visit to the building, taking the few photographs that illustrate our text." They consist of a view of the patio, a detail of Atl's mural, and a view of the main stairway showing the plain whitewashed walls.[28]

That August Vasconcelos mentions in a letter that "the inauguration of the building of San Pedro y San Pablo barely over... I found that the walls recently prepared in view of their decoration were pasted with pamphlets."[29] In his *Memoirs* the incident is rephrased: "Copies of a pamphlet were scattered over the walls recently prepared for the fresco."[30] This means that at that date the fresco had not yet been started. Begun in August or September 1923, the mural was completed within roughly four months. On December 27 a reporter, Manuel Horta, spoke of "how the work is nearly finished." His article is illustrated with photographs that show the painter on his scaffold and the fresco over two-thirds completed. The foreground personages were still missing; Horta saw only "the outline of some personages," i.e. their rough first draft.[31]

By January 10, 1924, the fresco was completed.[32] On March 2, 1924, Rivera wrote in *El Demócrata:* "Today painters who, like Roberto Montenegro, worked apart from the tendencies that bind us have drifted toward us by natural evolution. The last work of Montenegro means such a tremendous effort of orientation and purification ... that those who struggle within the truth will not slight its worth."[33]

The end of 1923 was weighty with political matters. The de la Huerta rebellion broke out on December 5. According to my diary I was asked on December 12 to give an artillery course to new federal

28. *El Universal,* June 30, 1923.
29. Open letter, *El Universal,* Aug. 17, 1923.
30. *Desastre,* p. 203.
31. "Un Fresco de Roberto Montenegro," *El Universal Ilustrado,* Dec. 27, 1923.
32. Sóstenes Ortega, "Diego Rivera íntimo," *El Universal Ilustrado,* Jan. 10, 1924.
33. "Arte pictórico."

recruits. On December 15 I made ready to join the Obregón forces together with Senator Hernández Galván, a dear friend, since murdered; but a federal victory, the first battle of Ocotlán, had already slackened the emergency.

It was perhaps the extreme martial quality of the moment that lent an air of futility to art activities. This helps to explain the disenchanted remark of Ortega, acidly summing up at the beginning of 1924 the worth of the decorations that embellished the old church and convent: "San Pedro y San Pablo has been left a museum of mediocrities."[34]

34. "Diego Rivera íntimo."

CHAPTER 9

The Preparatoria School

Though painted early, the murals of the former chapel and convent of San Pedro y San Pablo made but a marginal contribution to the formation of a communal Mexican style. The major role was played by the murals of another building, the Preparatoria School, where a group that included Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros cut its first mural teeth.

Founded soon after the Conquest, the school prospered under the joint advocacy of San Ildefonso and San Pedro y San Pablo. Dated 1740, the present building shows on the outside a vast expanse of ruddy *tezontle,* volcanic stone, light as cork, rough as pumice, whose rosy hue sings as strong against its putty-colored stone frame as do the autumn vines of northern climates. The funneled openings of splayed and scalloped windows slice diagonally through the thick of the wall. Monumental doors with a heavy geometry of abstract forms frame alabaster panels carved in praise of the Virgin and of San Ildefonso. Inside are three open patios, each lined with three tiers of arcades.

When the pictorial renaissance took hold of it, the building was already resigned to the feel of murals. Its walls still showed the stray remains and scars left by previous renaissances that had come and gone in its two centuries of existence. In accordance with Mexican colonial usage, murals were born with the building, painted for the main auditorium by the Mexican Murillo, José Ibarra, as a background for academic functions that vied in splendor with the auto-da-fés of the Inquisition. The decoration was keyed high to match its splendid audience: president and faculty attended gowned in

blue velvet, and graduates were robed in blue, with red scarves and badges for bachelors and philosophers, blue ones for grammarians.

Somewhat later, in 1760, Antonio Vallejo painted for the assembly hall the death of Saint Francis Xavier, with picturesque *chinoiserie* accessories, and for the sacristy of the college chapel two mural panels, the only ones that are still in place.

"The Descent of the Paraclete" is arched at the top, irregularly cut at the base to make way for a low door and its baroque lintel, a concave shell form reclaimed from the thick of the wall. The background of the mural panel is in contrast to a dull blue sky with the diagonal thrust of a dull red curtain against ruler-drawn, gray-tinted architecture. Seen in natural perspective, the Holy Dove flutters before this dark expanse, flinging in pinwheel fashion the sparks that symbolize the Holy Tongues. Down on earth, Mary is the center of a human *tableau vivant,* whose action is frozen by the sudden hail of Fire. Rebozoed in a blue veil, she kneels before a Bible open on a cubic lectern, distracted sideways from her pious lecture by the fireworks of this neo-Annunciation. A chorus of holy women, pink-cheeked and round of flesh, repeats the gesture. At a lower level are lateral groups of apostles, in somber drapes of dusky ultramarine, rusted golden ochre, mauve gray. Only the young Saint John is cheerful, in contrasting reds and greens. An older man, with an open book on this thigh, shades his eyes from the splendor of the spiritual lightning.

For the adjoining wall, with arched top and V-shaped base, Vallejo painted "The Holy Family with the Seven Archangels" (Fig. 17). Up high is God in Majesty, His court a curvilinear row of cherubs reflecting inverted the top arch, and a choir of winged musicians, one pinning his viola de gamba between his leg and a cloud. Between upper and nether regions, a gray void is split vertically, dimly showing behind a vast, dark, foldless curtain, an arched, stone-colored palace. Over this neutral ground a dim orange glow oozes from the flight of the Holy Dove.

On earth are two facing armchairs, square-backed with archaic severity, their upholstery lined with copper nailheads. Joseph half sits, half kneels by one—a very young Joseph, with black beard and

gray blue robe, scarcely less dimpled than the naked Child in his arms. Seated facing him is Mary, also young and gay, a Nattier-blue veil drawn over the rose madder of her gown, with delicate, eloquent, fluttering hands. From a lower level, the grandparents Ann and Joachim rejoice at the scene, youthful in spite of the gray wigs and wrinkles added as if they were an afterthought, looking like mock oldsters in a college play.

The seven archangels tread, with pink feet that never contacted earthly dust, the severely squared gray-stone floor. As sprightly as good fairies, they crowd around the Child. More modish than those of the neighboring humans, their heavenly gowns have fluffed sleeves and retroussé skirts made to reveal pink elbows and round knees. They hold traditional accessories, a feather, a fisherman's harpoon, a censer, a rolled document, a long-stemmed lily, a scepter and crown, and a horn of plenty crammed with roses and parrot tulips.

But a century had elapsed, and the Regal College of San Ildefonso, San Pedro y San Pablo, was now the National Preparatoria School, its glittering halo of patron saints wrenched away by successive radical reforms. Mexico was Juárez recast; cartoonists lithographed Lerdo de Tejada, President of the Republic, as an evil knight breaking a lance against nuns and putting monks to flight.

In November 1874 the city fathers, trusting that *circenses* would keep their suspicious pious flock distracted from less gracious matters, celebrated the Feasts of Peace. Yet one care remained constant in this new century and in this changed world, a love of murals equal to that of colonial times, and a mural was inaugurated in the college building, planned to rival in modern terms those of Ibarra and Vallejo.

Don Gabino Barreda, director of the Preparatoria School and a devotee of Auguste Comte, solemnized peace, industry, and art with a feast of his own devising. As a means of implanting a positivist curriculum in a Mexico where education had traditionally been in the hands of religious orders, he dreamed of recasting Mexican art in new molds, replacing Catholic *santos* with scientific ones.

Because of this, and after a mural lapse of fourteen years, Juan

Cordero returned to tempera painting with a lay subject, "a delightful ode to the immortal glory of Franklin, Fulton, and Morse," featuring Minerva, goddess of teaching, and two newborn muses, Electra and Vaporosa. Instead of antiquated palms and harps, Electra toyed with a magnetic compass, while Vaporosa observed the transformation of water into steam by means of a glass apparatus. The practical benefits of science were suggested by the sight of stevedores unloading cargo from a boat, and that of "rails that lead toward far-flung nations, a speedy locomotive dragging its cars" (Fig. 18a). To retain his right to the title of "Mexican Titian," Cordero splashed the background with "a splendid sky spotted with golden clouds; the glow of light on the horizon makes the night vanish from the dark firmament, substituting at its zenith a lovely sapphire blue that borders the celestial dome."[1]

Cordero had painted his last religious mural, that of San Fernando, without pay. His Comtist venture brought him little more. His contemporaries implied as much, calling the picture "the most valuable gift," adding, "Justice asks from us some compensation—may it be gratitude." The suggestion was duly followed and in somewhat flamboyant fashion. According to López-López:

> Allocution delivered by Don Gabino Barreda in the name of the National Preparatoria School, during the festivities in which said school crowned with laurels the eminent artist, Señor Juan Cordero, as public testimonial of gratitude and admiration for the mural painting with which he adorned its walls.

In the course of the eloquent speech, Don Gabino mentioned "the fine arts that in our country are near extinction because of a lack of subject matter..." only to lift his eyes to a rosier future:

> It is the glorious lot of the Preparatoria School to blaze a new trail for Mexican aesthetics. It feels proud of having inspired the genius of a true artist to a composition ... meant to idealize ... the spirits of SCIENCE and of INDUSTRY that stand for the pacific activities of man.... The Preparatoria School places today by my

1. López-López, "Pintura al temple," *Poesías y Discursos.*

> hand on the brow of this sublime artist the symbol of immortality.... Glory to art! Glory to genius!

At this juncture the artist was crowned with a wreath of solid gold weighing 360 grams, treasured to this day by his descendants.

The ceremony had bizarre undertones for the two main participants. Besides being director of the Preparatoria School, Barreda was family physician to the Cordero family, and the artist made use of his professional services. Thus we witness the rare spectacle of a medical doctor solemnly bestowing on his patient the gift of immortality.

Cordero well knew that his message was addressed to a none too placid audience. To placate them he resorted to a plastic stratagem, that of painting in the foreground "a childish genie, with a finger raised to his lips to impose quiet and invite contemplation." De la Peña, speaking in the name of the faculty on the day of the unveiling, commented: "The child urges order and silence, surely not from grownups who need no admonition, but from children and adolescents or, to be blunt, from the students of the Preparatoria." This naïve recourse to a painted prefect to keep the youngsters in check proved vain. In 1900 the mutilated picture was replaced by another, lesser, Minerva, a stained-glass window made in Switzerland.

In spite of this intermittent contact with art, and of the key role that the Preparatoria School played in the mural renaissance of the 1920s, its history corresponds more closely to the seismograph of Mexico's political and military fortunes than it reflects its aesthetic course.

A bare twenty years after its completion in 1740, its Jesuit faculty was ousted, the Flanders regiment bivouacked in the building, and books from the sacked library lay scattered in the gutter. When American invaders occupied the capital in 1847, one of the battalions of General Scott was quartered in the school. More troops, French this time, were billeted there under Maximilian.

No lambs themselves, the students enjoyed rough games of their own, and roughest of all under Díaz was that of opposing seven of his terms in office. An eyewitness of the anti-re-election riots of 1892,

Guadalupe Posada engraved metal cuts for the *Gaceta Callejera* that show how the mounted police open their way with horses hoofs and the flat of sabers through a student mob which strikes back with improvised weapons.[2] Student Diego Rivera took part in a similar affray, when the rebels, besieged within the school, showered the mounted police with building stones, rotten eggs, and hot oil.

Among the students who softened the Díaz regime for the kill was José Vasconcelos. His personal history is closely woven with that of the school, in a cycle that opened as young José shouted himself hoarse against venerable, pot-bellied Justo Sierra, Secretary of Instruction and Fine Arts under Díaz, and closed when, twenty years later, himself Secretary of Education, Vasconcelos sweated to discipline a new generation of students that shouted itself hoarse against him.

The awe felt by the young provincial at his first contact with the school never wore off. "I could hardly stifle my pride as I felt co-owner of the noble arcades, the airy courts, classrooms, and laboratories."[3] Recently put in the place of the destroyed Cordero tempera, the Minerva in stained glass distracted him, as he ascended the main stairway, with thoughts of his Oaxaquenan fiancée, though "at that moment, my school was my love."

> Outside of classes, the regime was that of military barracks. We had for supervisor a Porfirist colonel, with a dozen prefects acting as sergeants.... Our souls rebelled under the yoke. Any or no pretext would have us ganging together and breaking into a shout session, an irresponsible collective howling that brought quick punishment.... A second or third capture meant irrevocable expulsion.[4]

Under General Huerta, martial interference within the Preparatoria School reached its peak. Separated into squadrons, the students drilled, trotted, and paraded on the spot (Fig. 18b). Genaro Estrada, later Secretary of Foreign Relations, himself the mildest of

2. *Gaceta Callejera*, No. 1, May 1892.
3. *Ulises Criollo*, p. 140.
4. Ibid.

booklovers, paradoxically endorsed the following decree, as resonant in the Spanish original as the "tubae, fistulae, citharae, sambucae et psalterii, et symphoniae" in the Book of Daniel:

> Decreed the 19th of April, 1913, to be enforced beginning September 5, 1913.
>
> The Secretary of War has furnished students, teachers, and employees with 1400 dress uniforms and corresponding amounts of cartridge pouches, broad-sword belts, boots, leggings, gauntlets, gloves, panaches, helmets, service caps, etc.... Through the same channel the school has been stored with cartridge boxes, French horns, trumpets, leather accessories, leather aprons, pickaxes for sappers, saddles and trappings, bridles, bits, saddlecloth, and horses....
>
> The uniforms consist of military jackets and bell-bottomed trousers of dark green cloth, woolen leggings, Russian caps, black and white tipped with white feathers, edges and ornaments carmine, with loops of gold braid for the shoulder and badges of gold.[5]

By 1914 it was Huerta's turn to slink into exile and Venustiano Carranza's turn to rise. Vasconcelos came back, victor with Carranza, with a choice of political spoils: "All right, tell the First Chief that I do indeed want a position.... No, don't be frightened, I am not going to ask for a ministry ... but for a post that pays so little that it is, rather, honorary. I ask for the directorship of the Preparatoria School."[6]

In a public ceremony Secretary of Education Palavicini handed the job to Vasconcelos, whom he assessed as "a young man of powerful mental capacity." Instead of uttering platitudes in his answering speech, the young man gave voice to his horror at seeing his school desecrated by Huerta's militarism:

> The reaction has respected nothing. Usurping hands have reached even into this school, most important in the nation, to

5. In *Boletín de la Escuela Preparatoria*, 4 (1913), 73.
6. Vasconcelos, *La Tormenta*, p. 122.

> hide the clean torsos of young men under the vile uniforms and insignias of a despicable caste.... I am informed that one still finds in the storage rooms of the school proof of the profanation visited upon this institution as well as on free will. The few hundred carnival costumes that lie there we shall burn forthwith. May the stains left by contact with our military class be erased from the hearts of these young men—consumed in the same flames.... The past is dead, let us build anew![7]

But there was no time for the eager director even to strike the match to the joyous bonfire he planned, fueled with military jackets and bell-bottomed trousers, Russian caps, gold braid loops, and badges of gold. After just two weeks, his attachment to the first chief was questioned and the director of the Preparatoria was clapped in jail.

Though subsequently twice appointed Secretary of Education, Vasconcelos always looked back longingly to the lesser post of director of the Preparatoria. His obsession was such that in February 1922, while holding the portfolio, finding no candidate he thought good enough for the post of director, he wrote to Antonio Caso, head of the university system: "I have decided to dedicate a few hours daily to the task of personally carrying on the duties of director, at least until the school is reorganized."[8]

A close friend of Vasconcelos since the bygone days of the Atheneum of Youth, Caso nevertheless objected strongly to this improbable arrangement by which a subaltern (Director of the Preparatoria) was also his superior (Secretary of Education), and handed in a tentative resignation. Rather than estrange Caso, Vasconcelos dismissed himself from the lesser post, turning it over to the future labor leader, lawyer Lombardo Toledano.

About this time, another mural renaissance added aesthetic woes to the political quandaries of the school. In 1922, as in 1760 and in 1874, the walls of the building received the brunt of a pictorial assault. Intent on converting the masses to the Pythagorean mode, Vascon-

7. Vasconcelos, in *Boletín de Educación*, 1, 1914.
8. In *El Universal*, Feb. 4, 1922; reprinted in *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*, 1, 266.

celos, with no qualms, turned his beloved school into a testing ground, for purpose and school were one in the depths of his consciousness. This move did not lack a practical angle. Although the contact with "beautiful forms and figures" was primarily a means of philosophical initiation, Iamblicus offers assurance that art also "possesses a soothing therapeutic effect over the passions and routines of men."[9] The décor to be provided by the painters might even iron out disciplinary problems.

Practice proved otherwise. When Vasconcelos, with the noblest of motives, encamped muralists in his cherished school, they soon found, though they were not squeamish themselves, that it was no ivory tower. Actually, their scaffolds clogged the main entrance and the upper flights of the main stairway. Lime troughs, sand piles, masons in soiled coveralls, and painters indistinguishable from masons gave the noble eighteenth-century patios an air of being in perpetual disrepair. The charge of sinning against beauty was another reason for the lack of warmth in the students' welcome. A more substantial grudge was that the artists, alleged creatures of the Secretary, seemed fair game to his political opponents.

A three-cornered feud began. That between artists and students flared into body blows or smoldered through uneasy armistices, ending in 1924 with the ejection of the painters from the school. Meanwhile Orozco, Siqueiros, et al. witnessed another tug of war from their scaffolds, this one waged between Vasconcelos and Toledano for control of the students. When accused of defiling the quiet of a temple of learning, the painters could testify that what went on behind their backs while at work was in no way milder than the "monsters" they created.

Vasconcelos gave the first hearty tug: "The inauguration of the building of San Pedro y San Pablo barely over, I found its walls ... soiled with pamphlets.... The measures I ordered to expel the signers ... were not carried out."[10] Loath to pacify his superior, dynamic Toledano referred the matter to the students themselves, with the expected result: "A Court of Honor was held ... that ab-

9. Vasconcelos, *Pitágoras*.
10. Open Letter, *El Universal*, Aug. 17, 1923.

solved of all charges the twelve students who were the authors of the pamphlet."[11] The Secretary insisted on punishment. Rather than yield, Toledano resigned his directorship. The next day, Antonio Caso resigned in sympathy, this time for good, while the students went on strike, clamoring for the resignation of Vasconcelos. Instead, a new director replaced Toledano, mild and willing Don Roberto Medellín. But the headlines that reported his first day on the job were far from mild: "Formidable affray in the Preparatoria School. Attempted aggression against the Secretary of Education."

Laughed at by the partisans of Toledano, the new incumbent had telephoned the Secretary to come and reinforce him with the prestige of his higher authority. At the sight of Vasconcelos, "the students broke into screams of 'Down with Vasconcelos!' 'Lynch him!' 'Down with the tyrant!'... The Secretary sent for a fire squad ... to turn their hoses on the troublemakers. The firemen were stoned; shots were fired. A group of students got busy cutting water hoses. The fire department suffered a loss of 10,000 pesos."[12]

This report minimizes the facts. One of the shots blew off the fire chief's nose, and his men retreated to the street carrying their bleeding superior. Deserted by timorous aides, the Secretary found himself alone, besieged in a second floor office, and barely escaped lynching.

The new director of the university, replacing Caso, was an old man, Ezequiel Chávez, faithful relict of many incompatible regimes, once Undersecretary of Education under Porfirio Díaz. Intent on justifying his stewardship, Vasconcelos wrote to him on September 20, 1923, of "the improvements made the in Preparatoria School in the last two years: an installation of baths with hot and cold running water, a pool for swimming and bathing, another pool for girls, also decorations, repairs, gifts of scientific apparatus, publication of text books, miscellaneous improvements."[13]

Though the controversial murals are mentioned in passing as "decorations," Vasconcelos dared not stress this doubtful bounty.

11. *El Universal*, Aug. 19, 1923.
12. *El Heraldo*, Aug. 30, 1923.
13. In *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*, 2 (1923), 285.

Well might he gloss over the disputed decorations, for they were shocking to the aging conservative Chávez, who was soon after to lend his moral support to their partial wrecking. A witness reported in July 1924: "The most excellent President of the University, Sr. Chávez, declared on a certain occasion and in front of a substantial gathering of students, 'Those paintings are not beautiful.'"[14]

Charles Michel, writer, chaperon to a barnstorming exhibit of Belgian painting, and a painter himself, has left us the only contemporary sympathetic account of the artists' predicament as they pursued their task in these cloisters of learning. Dated January 1923, it came as an opportune boost for Vasconcelos' artistic policies, and at a difficult moment:

A Pictorial Revolution in Mexico

The Diego Rivera Group

... His staff consists of Revueltas, Alva, Leal, Cahero, Charlot, Siqueiros, etc.... and they have for battlefield all the walls of the National Preparatoria School, from ground to roof.

Do not take it lightly. You will see, this is a true revolution in the grand style. Mexico has for Secretary of Public Education an energetic man deeply in love with his patria... who well knows the forces latent in his country. Diego Rivera and his group happened to be in Mexico. Vasconcelos had flair enough to recognize in them the champions of a new art....

With burning zeal they pledged him their faith and intrepidity, and Vasconcelos banked on these securities. The painters needed space, surfaces to cover. The Secretary chose a school, an ancient palace in colonial style most vast and beautiful, and let them at the walls.... With very little money, only what the Secretary could strictly spare to sustain their life for a few months, the painters tackled the job. Slowly, to the stupefaction of the students, of their good bourgeois parents, and of their scandalized teachers, the enormous frescoes began to materialize....

Among the reactionary tribe, an oath was sworn to stop

14. "Communist Manifesto," *El Demócrata*, July 21, 1924.

Diego. At first, they promised him a sound thrashing, and then inclined to a lynching. The next day Rivera and his disciples climbed on their scaffolds ostentatiously provided with substantial pistols. I saw them at work today. Admirable!

After six months of grinding colors, melting resin, and painting until weary, they have arrived at the last penny of their meager allowance. Unable to give something on account to his landlord, Diego Rivera is ready to encamp on the battlefield at the foot of his scaffold. Even so, his set smile of triumph, somewhat disdainful, is not dampened. "We are fully aware," says he, "that, once finished, our frescoes may not stand more than three months the wrath of our foes. After that, we will paint them again."

Pointing to the insipid plaster of the empty panels, one of the young painters pronounces with vehemence a word whose gluttonous admiration I find impossible to translate, "*Preciosos! Preciosos!*" And they all blink and see in spirit the prodigious reflection of their handsome dream. Besides magnificent frescoes and encaustics that the patient and hard labor called for by these ingrate techniques brings forth to gradual flowering, their enthusiasm baits their imagination with phantasmagories of a grandiose movement of contemporary art.

"But life, life! Money to execute all this!"

"We are plain laborers of the great human task," answers Diego. "Work, food, drink—and colors, those are all our needs. They have been supplied up to now and will continue to be."

He throws back a head wreathed in smiles and, contemplating the changing skies of Mexico, adds gently, "and if they are denied us—we shall take them."[15]

Salvador Novo recorded the reaction of the man in the street: "'How incredible,' exclaim the people, 'that a man of the mettle of Vasconcelos ... allows and approves that the Regal College of San Ildefonso be submitted to such willful indignities.'"[16]

15. In *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*, 1 (1923), 369.
16. "Diego Rivera y sus discípulos," *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 3, 1924.

D. H. Lawrence, writing in *the Plumed Serpent* of his visit to the college in 1923, shows that the reaction of a visiting superman agreed substantially with that of the man in the street:

> The University [Lawrence's name for the Preparatoria] was a Spanish building that had been done up spick and span, and given over to the young artists to decorate. Since the revolutions, nowhere had authority and tradition been so finally overthrown as in the Mexican fields of science and art. Science and art are the sport of the young. Go ahead, my boys!

The boys had gone ahead.

CHAPTER 10

Rivera: Premural Career

Rivera's first mural was painted in the auditorium of the Preparatoria School. The painter confided to a reporter in 1922 that the painting of this wall had made a dream come true: "I saw this for the first time twelve years ago, I pictured the complete decoration as if it was already there. Think of it! How man goes on, and events of world significance—so many things."[1]

"Twelve years" before the interview would mean that Rivera had the vision back in 1910, on his return from a first stay in Europe. The newly organized National University was inaugurated at that time, the official ceremony taking place on September 22, 1910, in the same auditorium of the Preparatoria. For the occasion, a $2,550 pipe organ encased in an elaborate carved frame was brought from the "Salón del Generalito" to a recess especially designed in the center of the back wall. Together with the rich cement moldings, Turkish carpets, and potted plants, it made the speaker's platform into a tableau that vied in splendor with Peacock Alley in the—still young—old Waldorf Hotel, as Mexicans who knew New York could attest.

A news photograph of the inauguration discloses an orderly crowd of notables ensconced in the tiered seats of the auditorium, pigeon-chested ladies smothered under headgears of taffeta and artificial flowers, men adorned with martial mutton-chops and thick-lensed glasses which added the intellectual touch to the military—glasses that were the badge of the *científicos*, the brain trust that shaped the economic policies of General Díaz.

"How man goes on, and events of world significance," mused

1. Quoted by Del Sena, "Diego Rivera," *El Universal Ilustrado*, April 6, 1922.

Rivera, as he took note of the respectable people who sat there stolidly, welded to an apparently unshakable order, their political beliefs backed up by the police and, if need be, by stool pigeons. After thirty years of living in it, they thought their world was eternal. If they too had seen the vision that the painter said he saw, scrawled on the drab cement surface of the back wall, they would have rightly loathed it, for that uncouth writing on the wall could spell nothing but the revolution that was to rip open their luster and plush within a few months.

Had it been focused sharply enough to show the neocubistic style of the mural, the vision would have frightened Rivera as well, since it implied a future change of heart amounting to a bilocation of personality. In 1910 the painter was a fledgling academic master, a docile retriever bringing back from Europe the artistic booty that his aged protector, Don Teodoro Dehesa, rightist governor of the state of Vera Cruz, had paid him to fetch.

In November a show of Rivera's European output—themes from Spain, Belgium, and France—opened at the San Carlos Academy. The moment was scarcely propitious. Art news trailed behind grave political news that heralded the birth of the revolution. According to *El Imparcial* of November 18: "The exhibition is scheduled to open next Sunday, the twentieth. Diego Rivera sends especially printed invitations to friends, to Secretary Justo Sierra, as well as to his old teachers." More news: Police break up an intended anti-re-election meeting. Over the border, sixty Mexican secret agents spy on the moves of Francisco Madero, expected to head a revolt also set for the twentieth.

On November 19 Rivera presumably hangs his pictures. Madero insists that he will cross the border next day. However, "there is a dead certainty that he will be defeated the moment that he steps on Mexican soil." In Puebla, anticipating the expected uprising by twenty-four hours, Aquiles Cerdán kills, point-blank, Police Chief Cabrera, and defends his home singlehandedly against police and federal troops who fire ten thousand shots at him. On November 20 it is rumored that Madero has stepped on national soil. Aquiles is cornered at last and killed in his cellar, and his corpse exposed as a

public warning. Private showing of the Rivera exhibition that day, public opening the next.

The President of the Republic, the Secretary of Education and Fine Arts, and the Director of the Academy were all invited. General Díaz, who that day had other fish than art to fry, delegated the first lady, Doña Carmen Romero Rubio de Díaz, to grace the opening in deference to his trusted crony Dehesa. The retiring and pious woman left her familiar chores—among them that of rubbing a bleaching cream on the hands and face of her august husband to allay the green bronze of his Mixteca Indian skin—long enough to function as a protector of the arts. Doubtless the sentiments so ably expressed by Rivera's up-and-coming brush delighted her. She gazed upon the misty interior of "The Cathedral of Avila," where diagonal sun rays filtering through stained glass slid toward the altar sacred to Saint Theresa. She basked in the contrast implicit in "Old Stones and New Flowers," in the artist's own words: "An old Gothic church blackened by time, an ancient background for a graceful rosebay tree."[2]

The general consensus singled out as finest in the show a canvas that had already qualified for the 1909 Paris Salon, "The House on the Bridge," an autumnal corner of Bruges-la-Morte, where the stillness of humped bridge and waterway is emphasized by the fall of a lone drop that rings the mirror surface of the Belgian canal with concentric circles.

The twenty-four-year-old artist presented as a gift to his ancient benefactor Dehesa "The Cathedral of Avila" and "Old Stones and New Flowers." The Government bought seven pictures, though not at the price originally asked. The final sales document, written and underlined in Rivera's own hand, still exists in the archives of the Ministry of Education:[3]

2. Quoted by Bertram D. Wolfe, *Diego Rivera* (New York, Knopf, 1939), p. 46.
3. Archives of the old Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, Legajo 21, Expediente 1477, No. 102.

Prices reduced to half of those marked in the catalogue, by decree of this Ministry.	
The House on the Bridge	$ 1.000.00
The Beached Ship	500.00
A Peasant Girl (Brittany)	350.00
The Valley of Ambles	250.00
Notre-Dame of Paris in the Fog	425.00
The Tranquil Hour	275.00
The Old Woman from Chateaulin	150.00
Total	$ 2.950.00

There were, besides, private sales.

According to *El Imparcial* of December 2, General Porfirio Díaz begins his new presidential term. On December 3 Rivera "will return to Europe ... carrying a wealth of sketches on Mexican themes, which he plans to finish in his Spanish studio." On January 2, 1911, while federal troops hunt in vain for the self-styled Provisional President of the Republic, elusive Madero, the artist, his exhibition closed, sails for Europe.

The show proved to be a financial as well as a social success in the most conservative circles. To reconcile the known facts with the assumption of one of his biographers that at that date Rivera was at heart a partisan of Marx and Picasso is to gratuitously assume that the young man was capable of duplicity both in art and in politics.

Rivera's staid plan of refurbishing in Spain the sketches he had made in Mexico came to nought. Instead a cataclysmic conversion to modern art took the artist through successive grub stages, imitating in turn Zuloaga, Signac, and Cézanne, until he emerged as a full-fledged Parisian cubist in 1913.

In the talks among painters set on staking out the bounds of the new classicism, Rivera played a substantial role in the shaping of scientific cubism. One of the inner circle, Angelina Beloff, remembers the discussions:

> They were rather scholastic. Should one paste wallpaper on the canvas, or paint it in facsimile. How to represent cylindrical objects by the elevation, the plan, the slice; should the slice remain true to the actual diameter of the model, or of random scale, a mere symbol. Diego evidenced a broader viewpoint, being chiefly preoccupied with the building of the picture [Fig. 21].

Even more esoteric than the representation of three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional canvas were the experiments concerned with the representation of a fourth dimension. In spite of the popular belief, the term did not have spiritualistic implications for the painters, but referred to the extra factor of time-movement in our already recognized three-dimensional world. Even more than the golden section, this was the true philosopher's stone. In the thick of the metaphysical hunt, in 1917, Gino Severini spoke of this quest within a quest in *Le Mercure de France:*

> As the painter Rivera, following Poincaré, justly observed, "A being living in a world with varied refractions instead of homogeneous ones would be bound to conceive a fourth dimension." This milieu with distinct refractions is realized in a picture if a multiplicity of pyramids replaces the single cone of Italian perspective. Such is the case with certain personal experiments made by Rivera, who sees in Poincaré's hypothesis a confirmation of some intuitions of Rembrandt, Greco, and Cézanne.[4]

Ramon Gómez de la Serna describes Rivera at that time: "There, in Paris, all feared him. I saw him once fight seriously with Modigliani, who was drunk, fight shaking with laughter but with features filled with a terrible bitterness.... Diego then lived between paint and bottles of Vichy water which he fed to his voracious liver.... Once night came, he would further his inventions by candle light."[5]

Rivera's cubist studio was hung with black curtains. It hardly featured the retorts and alembics once an indispensable background to the experiments of his medieval colleagues; but these were replaced in turn by a no less mysterious accessory. The French critic André Salmon described it: "He had built a curious tool, a sort of articulated plane, like the one made of paper that engravers use to make their tracings. His French scientific vocabulary was modest. He called this apparatus *la Chose* ... Rivera even claimed to have found the true secret of the fourth dimension."[6]

4. "La Peinture d'avant-garde," *Mercure de France,* June 1, 1917.
5. "Riverismo," *Sur, I* (Buenos Aires, 1931), 59.
6. Quoted in Wolfe, p. 116.

In May 1914 a Mexican traveler interviewed Rivera, whom he found holed in on:

> a remote hill of Montparnasse among a polychrome humanity ... shaved Americans, Russians who handle indiscriminately bombs and brushes, English spinsters of lamentable tenacity, mixed shoots of all the breeds of the Americas ... Mild, bovine, tall, unvanquished [the artist] smiles without regret at the success that may have detained his adventurous metamorphosis ... judges his present work transitional, as he confronts it with a remote goal.

The Mexican visitor may have broached the subject of their common homeland. (Since the painter left it, Madero had tasted triumph, only to be murdered; Victoriano Huerta ruled with iron wiles; American marines were encamped in Vera Cruz.) For he noted that Rivera evidenced "a mysticism foreign to the struggle of the day." The interviewer blinked at the daylight as he emerged from the cloistered studio:

> The Byzantinism of artists is incompatible with the barbarism of civil strifes, the formidable primitivism of armed aggressions. Like monks of medieval leanings, or jewelers in hidden cells, they protect the feeble flame—culture, idealism, nobility—from the imperious hoofs of the centaurs.[7]

Three months after Rivera's talk with his compatriot, the centaurs stampeded East and West over Europe, slit open the France that gave him asylum, soon sent him packing for neutral Spain.

When Rivera was introduced to Renoir, the august cripple asked him amiably who his teacher might be. Rivera answered that his teacher was Picasso. Renoir nodded. "Ah! Mon petit, Picasso— des machines, des machines." The machines that Renoir saw in Picasso have a double meaning in French: more obviously, they imply the mechanistic quality of the stencil-sharp definitions, the cogs and pistons of analytical cubism; but in the language of the French

7. Fr. García Calderón, "La Obra del pintor Mexicano Diego María Rivera," *El Mundo Ilustrado*, May 17, 1914.

ateliers a "machine" is also the picture constructed in cold blood as contrasted with one born of passion. In Renoir's time an academic artist was expected to perfect one such "machine" each year, while casting a covetous glance at the medals to be distributed at the coming Salon. The Luxembourg Museum was clogged with painted contraptions embellished with historical or moral content: Henri Martin's "A Chacun sa Chimère" or Rochegrosse's "Incited by the Courtesan Thais, the Troops of Alexander the Great Put Persepolis to the Torch." Such giant canvases were the sorry heirs, but heirs nevertheless, of a heroic lineage. LeBrun's "Les Victoires de Louis XIV," David's "Le Sacre de Napoléon," Ingres' "Le Martyre de Saint Symphorien" were also "machines," as well as landmarks of the grand manner. The cubist came to envy these vast constructions that the impressionist had damned for their artificiality. Picasso sighed that art was in need of a David. André Salmon in *Peindre* referred to the imperial crown of "Le Sacre" as a sun fixed at the zenith of Art's firmament.

Such longings and sayings suggest at least a potential rebirth of monumental painting, also implied by the geometrical and architectural factors that permeated cubism. In fact the Parisian painters had forged a tool fit for monumental achievements, but they did not quite dare strike out. Still strongly under the spell of Cézanne's apple, they copied apples, bottles, pipes, and guitars, and shied away from the historical and moral content needed to truly renew the great tradition—where all plastic elements are gathered and ordered, are pruned and made to mature around a didactic core.

Some cubist works came so close to the grand manner as to constitute near misses. In about 1921 Léger painted "Le Grand Déjeuner" in which monumental chords—black, white, and vermilion—clothed female nudes sipping tea. At the time, Picasso inflated cow-eyed giantesses worthy of a new version of Ingres' mural "L'Age d'Or," were it not for the strictly enforced cubist taboo on literary content. Yet such pictures did clamor for an architectural setting. Though cubism itself failed to follow its mural promises to total fulfillment, it did point the way for the Mexican artist.

Paul fell once on the road to Damascus, a convert for eternity.

Rivera's cosmopolitan itinerary is strewn with a brimming measure of falls, apostasies, and corresponding conversions:

1914–15: Deductive cubism.
1915–17: Transitional cubism.
1917–20: Comes close to Cézanne and Renoir.
1920–21: Trip to Italy. A new tendency: to humanize.[8] [Fig. 20]

The latter style, the last blinding lightning to unhorse the Mexican in Europe, flashed as he came face to face with Italian painting *in situ*. Rivera's trip, which proved a decisive prelude to the future muralist's career, was engineered from faraway Mexico by the president of the National University, *Licenciado* José Vasconcelos.

When art historians express surprise at the sight of Mexican expatriate artists who, in the early 1920s, return simultaneously to roost in the Mexican capital, they forget or ignore the patient moves with which the future Secretary of Education had set his snares long before. In the case of Rivera, some of the evidence is preserved in the Archives of Education:

> Department of University and Fine Arts.
> Mexico. November 24, 1920.
> To the Treasurer of the Nation:
>
> Wire authorization to the Citizen Consul General of Mexico in Paris, France.
>
> To pay to Citizen Diego M. Rivera.
>
> The sum of two thousand pesos (2,000.00) national gold.
>
> As follows: In one payment.
>
> For the following reason, "As remuneration accorded by special decree of the Citizen President Constitutional Substitute of the Republic, for fulfilling a mission aimed at relating our National School of Fine Arts with similar Institutions in that country, and with its best artists."

8. Siqueiros, "Diego María Rivera, pintor de América," *El Universal Ilustrado*, June 16, 1921.

This "mission" was but a legal mask for even more transcendent pursuits, but nevertheless difficult to justify to the taxpayers. The acceptance of the sum brought Rivera blinking out of the secrecy of his cubist studio into another, more extensive art world, that of medieval and Renaissance Italy.

Venice, January 13, 1921

Señor Don José Vasconcelos

President of the National University
Mexico.

Most esteemed friend and Señor

Your amiable letter of December 7 reached me here, already on my way. A thousand thanks for it, and also for the thousand dollars received. Thanks to this sum, I am now realizing that tour of Italy for which I longed so... It would be superfluous to state of what crucial importance it is for everything that concerns my craft—but even I failed to realize in what measure, and how emphatically so.

Here one feels, sees, touches, and apprehends how the diverse materials manipulated by the different crafts unite, collaborating with, merging within, and exalting each other; until they make of the whole—building, city—a sum total that is function and expression of life itself, a thing born of the soil, organically tied to life—the living life of today, and past, and future—a thing lifted above all the factors dependent on time.

I am grateful for what you find to say concerning my work, and hope—I too hope—to realize something... that will justify the active and effective good will thanks to which I, as a painter, am now turning the most important headland of my life.

... The little I did was always meant to be shared with all, even though it happened between the four walls of my studio and far away. As you perhaps realize, these times were not exempt of trials for me either, fortunately.

During all these years, all my efforts were bent on gathering all the data I could, up to the limit of my strength; so that, when

> once back there with you and our people, I would attempt to make it work....
>
> Soon, when the time for action is at hand, we will see what can be done.... However small the contribution I may be able to make, I swear that it will not be the less ardent for it....
>
> Diego Rivera

Of the hundreds of drawings that Rivera did in Italy, the most moving are the hurried sketches in a kind of linear shorthand, jotted down breathlessly before a quattrocento panel, an Etruscan tomb fresco, a Palladio ceiling, or a Roman apse. Marginal notes in tentative French reveal the exalted mood.

A blend of warm and cool, of planning and of emotion stamps the moment. In one drawing, or rather diagram, Rivera stakes out a fifteenth-century *Hortus Conclusum,* hedged in between hexagonal boundaries geometrically ruled by halves and golden sections (Figs. 19a, 19b). A near prose poem scribbled in the margin glosses over the meaning of the rigid diagram:

> Excellent surface composition birds the size of angels angels the size of live birds. Saint Catherine seemingly feeds a bird while receiving from an angel the palm of martyrdom angels' heads are as big as are the roses in the mystic rosebush of Stefano de Verona—the virgin and child all is gold outbound of paradise within is all idea of optical scale is destroyed and all is in the spiritual order. It is truthful and gentle in extreme.[9]

Rivera was all too familiar with the Paris art market where easel pictures ("the goods," as Paris-born Degas cynically called them) are bought wholesale by the square foot and retailed by the square inch. Dealer Léonce Rosenberg had played the villain in "L'affaire Rivera" of 1917: "A major part of his work is in the hands of a Jewish *marchand* who hides it maliciously."[10]

By contrast, the traveler remained entranced by the scope and dignity of an art linked to Church or State, transfigured by sump-

9. The original notes are written in a French that at times lapses into Spanish forms, with erratic punctuation. The translations attempt to preserve the flavor of the originals.
10. Siqueiros, "Diego María Rivera."

tuous architectural settings. In Ravenna he copied a Roman river god witnessing the Baptism of Christ, portrait heads from the twin mosaics of Justinian and Theodora, and the processionals of San Apollinare Nuovo. The decrease of scale from architecture to mural to spectator he recorded in a shorthand sketch where a stiff Byzantine saint, framed between two columns and an arch, looms over kneeling parishioners.

Rivera discovered in Italy the never-to-be-solved dilemma that haunts the muralist—to respect the flatness of the wall, or to optically impair its architectonic function. He skinned a Mantegna down to its skeleton perspective, and noted a "construction where the partitioning of the surface itself follows directions related to depth and creating surface balance... the frightening relief does not harm the surface."

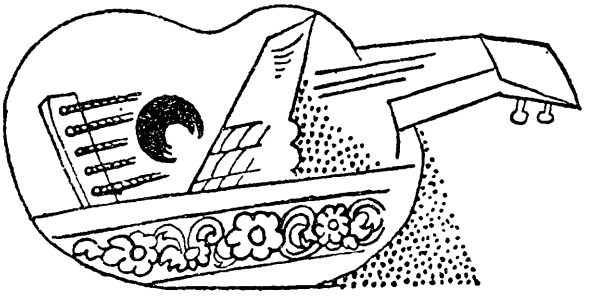
Some of these field notes are working recipes that would prove handy, should an opportunity arise. Of the frieze of fruits and leaves recovered intact from behind a framed Tintoretto, he wrote: "There is no varnish whatsoever. Perhaps the coat of varnish was added after the canvas was in place? Perhaps one worked slightly with glazes in the fresh varnish to harmonize once the thing was done? Blue-gray identical with that of *Père Cézanne*." On the detailed sketch of a painter's scaffold: "A scaffold for working on ceilings very simple to move sliding it over planks greased with lard slipped under the front legs raised by the means of wooden screw-levers... irons are varnished to prevent rust" (Fig. 22).

Rivera returned to France early in 1921, but Italy had spoiled Paris for him. He dreamed now of art sponsors grander than rue de la Boétie merchants, and remembered, as Vasconcelos had willed it, that his Mexico was the one place in the world where mural jobs were dispensed on the Italian scale.

In mid-1921 twenty-three-year-old David Alfaro Siqueiros wrote the good news home from Paris: "Rivera is looking forward to starting in a few days on his trip to Mexico, a trip that will acquire the importance of a fundamental clarification in our obtuse artistic milieu."[11] Besides his Italian sketches, the painter packed Baudouin's

11. Ibid.

modern textbook on fresco. A slow boat landed him at Vera Cruz before July 19, 1921, the date of his first Mexican interview. A water color, "La Frutera," is a first plastic document of his arrival. Its emphasis on tropical atmosphere shows how unfamiliar the artist found the sight of his own land after ten years of exile. It is said with some truth that Mexico was conquered by Indians and freed by Spaniards. It may be that, in the case of Rivera, a yeast of foreignness sufficed to fructify the Mexican seed. He said in his first Mexican interview: "What urged me to come back is something more than the homesickness that overtook me in Paris, in Madrid, in Rome, in all the countries of my pilgrimage.... I nurse certain projects that will



VII. Rivera, vignette for *El Maestro*, Oct. 1921.

doubtless give new and greater meaning to my work, if realized."[12]

Vasconcelos hesitated to back Rivera's "certain projects." "On arrival he asked me for a job. I was prejudiced because he painted cubism and, in my opinion that was not compatible with works of State—his head was full of Picasso."[13] As a test, he let Rivera illustrate the October number of his pet review, *El Maestro*. The vignettes are indeed in the cubist manner (Text fig. VII).

Unknown to himself, Rivera, returning from Paris, accomplished an historical mission that followed the normal pattern of Mexican art history. A lack of stylistic synchronization with the mother country or continent always plagues outlying settlements. In antiquity Cyprus created archaic figures long after mother Greece had

12. Quoted by Barrios, "Diego Rivera, Painter," *El Universal*, July 21, 1921; reprinted in *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 28.

13. Vasconcelos, in a manuscript written especially for this book.

discarded hers. In Mexico Rebull, a belated Ingrist, instructed his pupils in 1900 in terms of the Amaury Duval of 1860. Ramos Martínez triumphantly stamped the impressionist creed of the eighties on the young men of 1913. Rivera acted as carrier for the cubist creed a full decade after its Parisian blossoming.

A willing audience received the new gospel: "The bravest among the young artists approached me in a body with a sympathetic attitude of rebellion, to inquire about what there was in the tendencies of which I was, according to them, the ambassador."[14] His answer was a lecture given on October 20 in the library of the Academy. He expressed "vast ideas about the new artistic orientation of Europe... The notable painter closed his admirable lecture with the following words: 'The painter not in sympathy with the newest currents of thought does not deserve the name of artist, scarcely that of man.'"[15] A photograph shows the lecturer in a most dignified mood, black suit, black tie, as sedate as a judge, or, as Cézanne said of Manet, dressed like a "notaire." The typical Rivera of future cartoons, with open shirt, baggy pants, and a pistol at the hip, was not yet born.

To know what young painters were doing, Rivera visited the open-air school of Coyoacán. It must have seemed a wistful anachronism for the postcubist painter to confront impressionism in full swing in 1921, regardless of the excellence of individual talents. Yet who was he to cast the first stone? Less than a decade before, in his pointillist period, he used to paint with twenty-eight brushes, one for each of the four values of the seven colors he used. But now he was reformed, purged of this surfeit of rainbow by cubism's brown molasses. The sensuous delight in pigment that the young so hopefully displayed was far removed from the mental tension, dolorous and dry, that was his present appanage. The cubist painter, suspicious of nature's warbles, tamed the shrew to scale,

> ...et dans ce beau désordre
> Rétablit l'ordre humain.

as Cocteau put it.

14. Rivera, "De Pintura," *La Falange*, Aug. 1, 1923.
15. *Excelsior*, Oct. 21, 1921.

Rivera started on a self-appointed task as censor by scourging the belated pioneers of impressionism: "Don Francisco de Goya y Lucientes used to say: 'The countryside is grand for picnics!' Painters, meditate his saying." Equally puzzling to the young impressionists who had strained so hard to see shadows blue was his praise of an untrained childish vision over that of the professional artist. "Looking at children's work ... fresh marvels, pure harmonies of color and acute form, prompts one to repeat to men who paint: 'Be a child again!'"[16]

In the Academy show of 1921 Rivera singled out for praise, from a dark corner where they had been hung with shamed laughter, canes with carved handles by "the worker whose name I could not learn. Love, feeling, robust understanding of the material, no preciousness, and grand style, one not crippled by the Academy."[17] Twenty-five years later, when quite old and nearly blind, this worker, Manuel Martínez Pintao, was a great find awaiting museum, dealer, or collector.

Though Mexicans humbly took it for granted that their still colonial milieu could offer but little to the returning artist, Rivera found in Mexico what he could not find in Europe, art minus an art market. The Republic, streamlined by revolution, had embarked on the building and painting program for which the pilgrim sighed as he toured Italy. But while Venetian patrons had been aristocrats, with a proper quota of prejudices, exclusiveness, and heartlessness reflected in the decorative schemes they sponsored, the Mexican State meant to breed an art for the people. All agreed. Speaking for the young painters, Carmen Fonserrada remarked: "Works of art should remain in contact with the daily life of the people." And the day that Vasconcelos was sworn in to the Ministry, newsmen speculated on the meaning of his aphorism: "If Genius has such an exalted standing, it is because of its capacity to serve the people best."

Rivera's cautiously vague "certain projects" of July were ripe by November, when he confided to his friend José D. Frias: "The painter who does not feel attuned to the aspirations of the masses—this

16. Rivera, "La Exposición de la Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes," *Azulejos*, 1, 1921.
17. Ibid.

man may not produce a work of permanent worth. Not so the man who paints walls, decorates houses, palaces, public buildings. Art cut off from practical aims is not art."[18]

At the end of November the newly created Secretary of Public Education left for Yucatán, a land that seems remote even to Mexicans and that reciprocates the feeling. Following his Medici-like habit, Vasconcelos took Rivera on the trip, along with his usual artist-courtiers, Best and Montenegro. Whatever emotions Rivera felt at the Vera Cruz landing were intensified by contact with a quasi-mythical people, proud of ruins matched only by those of Egypt, and whose social reforms were more extreme even than those of the Mexican plateau. The party landed at Progreso on November 26, reached the capital Mérida the next day: "The station was jammed ... Conspicuous were the many banners of communists and socialists."[19]

Radical leader Felipe Carrillo Puerto, a tender green-eyed giant who claimed descent from the Mayan king Nachi-Cocom, acted as host at a state ball given in revolutionary style: instead of "Spanish" society ladies, the guests' partners were mestizas clad in the traditional loose white *huipiles*, dancing on sandaled brown feet.

On December first and second, the party visited Chichen Itzá, the Mecca of Mayan antiquity, with its astronomical observatory, colonnades, pyramids, and ball court still standing. The men slept in hammocks wrapped in mosquito nets. The next morning, Rivera stood in awe inside the precious inner chamber of the Temple of the Tigers, still ablaze with twelfth-century frescoes. Those best preserved combine complex geometric planning with lively anecdotic storytelling. To the Paris painter, still fresh from café talks of subject matter versus pure plasticity, this Sistine Chapel of the Americas acted as an Indian reminder of the classical postulate that both ingredients may blend to perfection.

On the third the travelers participated in one of those bizarre ceremonies by which revolutions attempt in vain to supersede existing traditions: "Excursion to the city of Motul where the Secre-

18. José D. Frias, "El Fabuloso pintor Diego Rivera," *Revista de Revistas*, Nov. 27, 1921.
19. *El Universal*, Nov. 28, 1921.

tary officiated as godfather in a number of socialist baptisms."[20] No doubt the officiates were surrounded again, as they had been on arrival, by a crowd in white, spattered with red scarves and flags, a color duet that long remained dormant in Diego's retina before crystallizing in his later frescoes.

His first doubts lifted by this daily intercourse with Diego's potent personality, Vasconcelos yielded. "I put him to work on a mural with a universal theme for the Preparatoria—in the auditorium. This was in December."[21] Less than three weeks remained before the end of 1921—helpers had to be recruited and scaffolds had to be built. It can be assumed that Rivera did not reach his first wall until early in 1922.

20. *El Demócrata,* Dec. 4, 1921.
21. Unpublished manuscript.

CHAPTER 11

Rivera's First Mural

In his first mural Rivera emerged cautiously from cubism into didactic painting. His return to Mexico as the propagandist of the European fashion followed a pattern normal enough in the history of Mexican art, but now he broke precedent. For when he was instrumental in welding together cubism and mural painting on a vast scale, when he adapted the borrowed means to their forgotten function, and especially when he joined anew abstract means and didactic ends, Rivera was truly a pioneer.

The following is a digest of the lengthy explanation of his mural theme, which Rivera redacted for Vasconcelos' approval. It discloses an intellectual planning as thoughtful as any known in more scholastic ages:

> Under the keystone of the arched ceiling, in a half-circle of deep blue, is the Light One or Primeval Energy, from which three rays of light emerge, objectified by three hands. The vertical hand points to Man arising from the Tree of Life, while the lateral ones signal his two principles, MAN and WOMAN, two nudes squatting at earth level, partaking of earth's essence and composition in form and in structure.
>
> The MALE is in colloquy with some feminine figures, emanated from his spirit: KNOWLEDGE, expounding itself for the benefit of Man; FABLE, with subtle, brown macerated features, who adds her necessary gloss to the former's explanation; above is EROTIC POETRY, with water-green eyes, ruddy skin, golden hair; at her left sits TRADITION, with crimson skirt, rebozo of red earth, hands at rest in her lap.

Higher stand four figures: PRUDENCE converses with JUSTICE; STRENGTH, light eyes focused far ahead, hands clasped on the edge of a shield, holds a dagger; CONTINENCE hides her face and hands under a soft violet veil.

Still higher, head and glance inclined toward the nether figures, SCIENCE links with possessive and persuasive gesture the three hierarchies at the right of the central symbol.

To the left, WOMAN squats at earth level, nude, her face raised toward the luminous symbol above (Fig. 23). At her right, DANCE raises her arms in a slow circular motion echoed by the flow of her golden hair.

Her black hair curled like vine tendrils, and with faunlike face, MUSIC blows a double flute of gold. Seated nearby, SONG hoards in her hands and lap the three Hesperian apples.

Crowning the group, smiles COMEDY.

Higher still, the three Theological Virtues, from left to right: CHARITY, clad only in her own reddish hair as in a penitential garment. Her left hand offers her breast for nursing. HOPE raises her face toward the central Unity. At her side stands FAITH, with hands clasped in prayer, eyes closed.

WISDOM unites the group to the central focus, holding her hands in the gesture that signifies Macrocosm, Infinity.[1]

Such complex ideation stood in bold contrast to the example of the School of Paris, whose aim at that time was to reach an art so pure as to be thoroughly shorn of didactic content. As an apologist for the cubists, Jean Cocteau wrote in 1923: "The drama no longer consists in painting a tiger that devours a horse, but in establishing between a drinking glass and the molding of an armchair certain plastic relationships that breed emotion, minus the intermediary of an anecdote."[2]

In accordance with the standards of the period, this passage extols still life as the supreme genre. Artists paid obeisance: Léger and Picasso, willing enough to paint gigantic bodies, shied at blowing a

1. "Las Pinturas," *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*, 1 (1923), 363.
2. *Picasso* (Paris, Stock, 1923), p. 15.

spirit into their nostrils. At that date Rivera alone felt brave enough to dissent from the established doctrine and to conceive his first mural in what the seventeenth century called *genre noble.* It was not in fact until the next decade that the School of Paris produced a didactic work complex enough to meet the Mexican challenge of 1922, with Amédé Ozenfant's "Vie Biologique," dated 1931–36.

Coached by the experiences of his Italian trip to recognize true mural postulates, Rivera could feel well pleased with the auditorium, which presented as varied a set of problems as any church or palace he had seen in Europe. The wall he tackled, over 270 square feet, was arched to fit a vaulted ceiling, and contained a recess, shaped like a semidome, made to receive the pipe organ.

Multiple points of view mark murals as organically distinct from easel canvases. Rivera summed up the optical problem in 1925: "The average of perspective diminution based on the distance between the back of the stage and the first and last rows of seats reserved for spectators—points of view imposed and permanent—determines the scale of the figures and the simplicity of their style."[3]

In this case the architectural postulate dictated not only scale and composition, but also subject matter. The relationship between wall and central recess recalls the one that exists between triumphal arch and absidial half-dome in early Italian basilicas. How Rivera admired the golden glory of their mosaics, personified Virtues, lean saints, winged oxen, and cherubs that are wheels of wings in motion all curtsying stiffly toward a giant Christ Pantocrator!

So strong was the suggestion that the artist followed its lead. For the domical recess he planned a Christ in slight disguise, and for the wall, an orthodox procession of Virtues, cardinal and theological, of gifts of the Holy Ghost and zoomorphic symbols of the Evangelists, courting God in his Unity and Trinity. A geometric over-all hue so cubistic as to be almost Byzantine, a gold background for the recess, gold halos for the Virtues, complete the relationship. Sober Marxists could well raise a puzzled eyebrow!

3. Note on the auditorium, *El Arquitecto,* Sept. 1925.

A good contemporary record of "Creation" in its early stages is an interview by Juan del Sena, published on April 6, 1922:

DIEGO RIVERA IN THE AUDITORIUM OF THE PREPARATORIA

I find him clothed in loose khaki pantaloons, loose shirt open at the neck, his tie impatiently knotted askew.

"First of all, big boy, we are going to take photographs."

He acquiesces, climbs on a movable scaffold, and with hammer and chisel incises lines traced in charcoal.

The recess features the figure of a man that has ovals and circles in place of a head, and cartoons for two or three heads are already in place on the wall ...

"Please tell me what means the kind of fresco with which you are going to decorate the auditorium, Diegote, and how you are going to paint it?"

"In encaustic. I decided upon this technique because it outlasts fresco, though the latter remains ideal for decoration and painting. In Pompeii and in Greece, not a single fresco is left standing."

"And how do you know this to be true about Greece?"

"Because I went to Greece specifically to study the technique that I am about to use. It is *la peinture à la cire,* as the French say ... Come and touch, and you will feel its sturdiness."

I touch, and effectively assure myself that the material is of the hardest, like tile minus the glaze. Encaustic promises to defy countless centuries.

He continues: "As you may well imagine, the main thing that took me months of work was to blend the composition with the architecture ... The decoration is constructed as if it were a building."

"Then you have not forgotten cubism?"

"Of course not! But after it is finished nobody will believe that it is there."...

"And why do you incise the lines with a chisel?"

"In the first place to stop the colors from running, and then

because an incised drawing has more architectural character than a traced line."

...I remembered that he had written an article praising the painters of ex-votos; so I tell him, half in jest and half in earnest: "I see nothing here to remind one of ex-votos."

"Why, this is nothing more than a big ex-voto."

...Diego María Rivera tells me with thinly veiled melancholy: "I wish I did not have to return to Paris; I wish I could stay here and paint forever—but it is impossible."

"Why?"

"Because I do not make as much money here as I do there."[4] [Fig. 24a]

It is interesting to note that the future fresco painter condemned fresco painting as impermanent. As for the trip to Greece, unsubstantiated by any other source, it may be a misunderstood reference to Etruscan tomb painting or a typical sally by the painter whom his friend Cosío was soon to characterize as "physically robust, extravagant in his way of dressing, genial in his fibs and lies."[5]

As a by-product of the painting of the auditorium, a workshop came into being, identical in its activities and purpose with those the old masters knew. Europe had forgotten such workshops, where a communal type of art was produced. Paris dealers stressed to idolization the holographic quality of painting, the personal twist in the handwriting with brush and pigment. Their captive artists were well fed and kept, but the link with society that monumental, impersonal art procures and that artists crave was discouraged in favor of more salable works.

Mexico was devoid of art dealers, if not of an art market. Thousands of art objects, toys, pottery, and ex-votos changed hands daily without benefit of a middleman. Once a champion of the stud farm of dealer Rosenberg ("Monsieur Rivera was probably the most prolific of my painters"[6]), the Mexican was now free to trade directly

4. "Diego Rivera," *El Universal Ilustrado.*

5. Daniel Cosío Villegas, "La Pintura en México," *El Universal,* July 19, 1923; reprinted in *Cuba Contemporánea,* April 19, 1924, and in *Revista de Revistas,* March 29, 1925.

6. Quoted by Wolfe, *Diego Rivera,* pp. 90–91.

with patron Vasconcelos, as directly as the Indian potter, squatting at his *puesto,* haggles and barters with the cook that covets his wares. Unlike Paris dealers and collectors, the Secretary did not insist on autography, as long as the picture put its message across.

Diego's first helpers were Xavier Guerrero, who was up to then Montenegro's technical adviser and assistant; Carlos Mérida, a famed modern since his 1920 show; and myself. Amado de la Cueva, just back from Europe, joined us in September. Salaries were small and camouflaged under politically anodyne disguises. Beginning March 11, 1922, I received eight pesos a day (about two dollars) in the assumed capacity of "Inspector of Drawing in the Public Schools of Mexico City Transferred to the Jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Education."

We wholeheartedly accepted a full schedule of manual tasks that coincided with our artistic point of view. Speaking for the group, Mérida wrote with religious fervor of "the new painters of today, who have not forgotten that painting is a craft as well as an art, who fall on their knees to grind pigment with their own hands."[7]

This was scarcely a figure of speech. Encaustic colors are not prepared commercially, and we ground the pigment with marble pestle over a marble slab in excess of all union hours. Mérida, in a neat smock that made him resemble a pharmacist rather than an artist, weighed with minute care, and mixed and dissolved in turpentine the wax and copal resin used as binder.

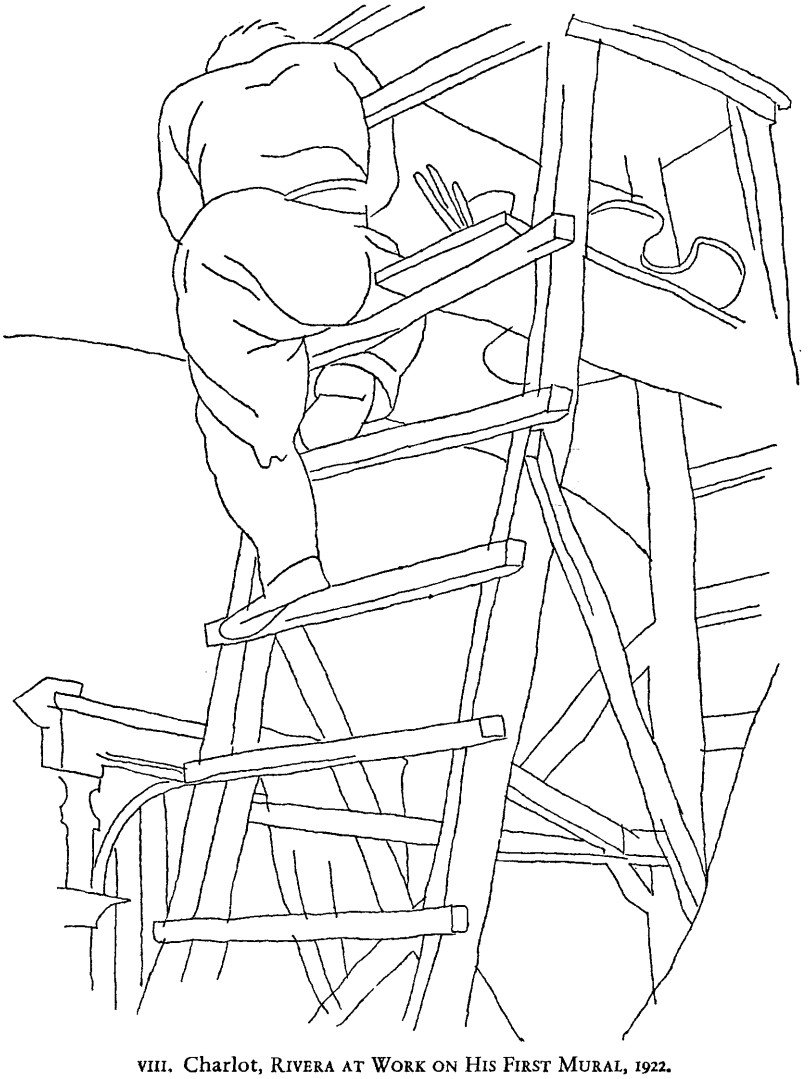
Other mural chores were the incising of the line in cement, the tracing, pricking, and pouncing of detail drawings, the texturing and priming for gold leaf, the priming of the wall with hot resin at the moment of painting, and the synchronization of a lick of the blowtorch with each stroke of the brush to vitrify its load of pigment. Besides, Amado de la Cueva posed nude for "Man," the one fragment Diego painted directly from nature.

Rivera was a gargantuan worker, likely to sit on his scaffold for fifteen hours at a stretch until totally exhausted (Text fig. VIII). Fearing the crash of his heavy body, we would lift him down to one of

7. "Nuevos Valores...," *Revista de Revistas,* May 18, 1924.

the auditorium seats, whence he would guide us verbally until well into the dawn.

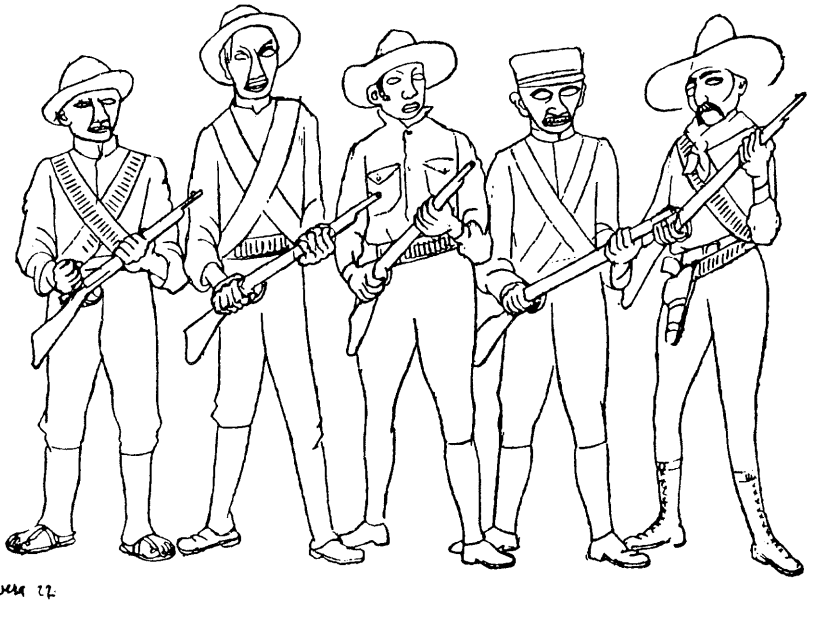
Started early in 1922, "Creation" was officially completed by March 1923. In December 1922 Ortega spoke of "Creation" as finished, while Molina referred to it in January 1923 as in the making. The statements are not incompatible. The main wall was completed at that



VIII. Charlot, RIVERA AT WORK ON HIS FIRST MURAL, 1922.

time, while the central recess and the dado remained unfinished. Stylistically as well as physically, the execution of the work splits into two parts, Rivera's trip to Tehuantepec marking the point of cleavage.

The Byzantine hue of the mural in the making had left Vasconcelos unconvinced. Rivera himself was beginning to look his own country in the face and to find her beautiful, and his Italian memo-



IX. Rivera, FIRING SQUAD. From *Azulejos*, Oct. 1921.

ries gradually faded (Text fig. IX). Says Vasconcelos: "Diego heard Best lecture on Mexican art. This perhaps inclined him toward national themes. To strengthen this tendency, I suggested and financed a trip to Tehuantepec (Text fig. X)."[8]

Rivera reached Tehuantepec toward the end of 1922. It is the birthplace of Vasconcelos and Mexico's most picturesque region. Post cards, ballets, and snapshots vie to popularize its females, beauteous in their theatrical costume—embroidered blouse as short as a breastplate, stiff conical lace-fringed skirt, incredible headdress of starched

8. Unpublished manuscript.

x. Rivera, TEHUANAS, ink drawing, 1922.
Collection Anita Brenner.

linen, huge as a cartwheel, which radiates from the face as its spoke.

Though this tropical land lacks Yucatán's fabled past, its present impressed the artist as equally fabulous. He came back with tall tales of a matriarchal society where Amazonian women lord it over wizened men, of Indian babies born white, left to brown to a permanent deep ochre in the scorching sun, of bathing beauties with skins dappled like leopard pelts. Tehuana women, coveting his substantial girth, said he, approached his wife proposing in barter any male she might in turn covet!

Rivera came back from Tehuantepec shaken into simplicity by all he had seen and experienced. The painted recess of the auditorium tells of his change of heart. Before leaving, he had lavished on its semispherical surface the mathematical resources gathered in his

Parisian quest for a fourth dimension. In April 1922 del Sena had seen there "the figure of a man that has ovals and circles in place of a head." Diego had described it with pride as: "The Pantocrat, arms stretched crosswise in an attitude that strengthens the main directive lines of the composition ... His posture parallels the slant of the vault, and his foreshortening is planned to appear convincing from all points of view."[9]

The rarefied atmosphere of this first draft, Italianate and cubistic, did not satisfy him any more. The side walls of the recess were still blank. He poured on them at once the hot tropical jungle and its fauna—two felines, a crane, a nocturnal bird, rustling through the heavy foliage (Fig. 24b). The stylistic duality of "Creation" may constitute an aesthetic flaw but, inasmuch as it tells the story of the artist's change of heart, it remains valuable as an index to Rivera's Mexican evolution.

The inauguration of the mural took place at 7:30 P.M. on March 9, 1923. The cast cement moldings that graced the hall in 1910 were still there, as well as the organ, though it was now stripped of its fancy casing. But the carpets, palms, ladies, and gentlemen had long since been swept away by the revolution. A bored and slightly disgusted reporter for *El Universal* wrote a pithy report:

> UNVEILING OF A CUBIST DECORATION IN THE PREPARATORIA
>
> Señor Vasconcelos presided. Seated at his left were painter Rivera and some employees of the Ministry of Education. After an overture of organ music, Señor Maples Arce occupied the stage, giving warm praise to the work of painter Rivera and to its frankly futuristic style. The speaker reviled the partisans of the impressionist style, going so far as to assert that the National School of Fine Arts was a brothel of pictorial art. He did not miss the opportunity to fling his passionate vocabulary at the periodicals of this metropolis, dubbing them literary chicken coops, in allusion to their style and taste. Having monopolized the rostrum for an hour and a half, the speaker concluded by saying that Rivera, back in Mexico after years of traveling and

9. "Las Pinturas," *Boletín*, 1 (1923), 363.

> living on the Old Continent in impressionist [sic] surroundings, produced this intensely nationalistic work, a credit to the artist in the opinion of the speaker.
>
> There was also another speaker whose name we could not make out, who spoke of the Americanistic style of the beautiful decorations that the famous artist had etched on the walls.[10]

The speaker whose name the reporter failed to learn was Antonio Caso, president of the National University.

Revista de Revistas featured the organ recital that preceded the ceremony, "musical renditions executed by the well-known organist, Julia Alonso."[11] Julia Alonso always wore her black hair hanging loose over a loose white gown. Her late husband had founded a new cult. She carried in her handbag a photograph that showed him bearded, naked, and crucified—a tableau that stamped his mystical inventiveness as somewhat derivative. That day she played nobly a fine selection of sixteenth-century music.

The official ceremony was followed on the twentieth by an intimate gathering of collaborators—painters, officials who had sponsored the work, masons, a few friends.

INVITATION

to the fiesta which the
Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors Will Hold
on Tuesday 20th of this Month in Honor of
DIEGO RIVERA
Beloved Comrade and Master of the Shop

On the occasion of completing the work of decorating the Auditorium of the National Preparatoria School, a work which resurrects monumental painting not only in Mexico but in all the world, beginning thus in our country a new flowering which will be comparable to those of ancient times, and the great qualities of which —good craftsmanship, wisdom in proportion and values, expressive clarity, and emotional power (all within a purely organic Mexicanism free of unhealthy and fatal picturesqueness)—mark the work as unsurpassable, and lovers of the craft of painting can share the science and experience here accumulated.

10. *El Universal*, March 10, 1923.
11. *Revista de Revistas*, March 11, 1923.

LICENCIADO DON JOSÉ VASCONCELOS
and
DON VICENTE LOMBARDO TOLEDANO
intelligent initiators and generous protectors of this work and of all the noble effort made toward the development of plastic art in Mexico.
LUIS ESCOBAR, XAVIER GUERRERO, CARLOS MÉRIDA,
JEAN CHARLOT, AMADO DE LA CUEVA
expert assistants of the maestro Rivera.
All this to give thanks to the Lord who kept them from a terrible and horrible fall from the scaffold in nearly a year of most painful labor at the height of about thirty feet.
12:30, at Mixalco 12, Tresguerras Cooperative Shop of Painting and Sculpture. Five pesos without fail in the pocket.
Very important note: So that the honorees be not accused of sponging, they will also pay for their eats.

The cooperative shop was a wooden shack built in the patio of 12 Mixalco, and the sculptor Germán Cueto and his wife Lola, who lived at that same address, were active hosts. The ceiling was decorated with red and black paper streamers in genuine pulquería style. The artists contributed informal posters extolling their point of view. Mérida, precise as always: "They call themselves painters and cannot mix a pail of glue-tempera paint!" Siqueiros, truculent as usual: "We paint on cement, not on toilet paper." Orozco penned an astonishing rendition of the conservative painter, a back view of an ass-headed individual, busying himself with himself.

All sat at the improvised table of planks straddling carpenters' horses, and all enjoyed the hot democratic meal—from Secretary Vasconcelos to master mason Luis Escobar.

An astonishing contrast exists between the critical estimates of "Creation" in the making and those published after its inauguration. The former reflect the opinion of an esoteric chapel of Rivera followers, while the latter set down the opinion of the public at large, who became cognizant of the work only after its public inauguration. Being a dependency of the university, the auditorium was free of college disturbances. Its usual quota of lectures, concerts, and scholarly meetings was thoughtfully sidetracked to the reception hall of the university building while "Creation" was in progress,

and painting proceeded behind locked doors. Charles Michel's article, "A Pictorial Revolution in Mexico," romanticized Rivera's task. His descriptions of battles between artists and students, of scaffolds assaulted and of raids repulsed are true only of the work that the younger painters were carrying on in the staircase and corridors of the Preparatoria School.

The earliest qualified opinion is that of Walter Pach in October 1922: "Constructive art ... initiated by Cézanne, made possible the great decorations for which the preceding generation hoped in vain. The service rendered by the Mexican government to the world in commissioning this work is indeed very great, and its consequences cannot fail to spread to other countries."[12] The prediction is now justified.

My eulogy, written in March 1923, suggests the friction with official Mexico that preceded the final applause:

> This man has erected amidst small intrigues and petty vices these monolithic breakwaters, this battalion of Virtues, each with its insignia and assigned duty, unwinking sentinels guarding the glyph of God.
>
> Bureaucrats have paraded their white ties in front of this majestic page. They say, "Very good, but somewhat expensive." The painter is accused of extravagance, of skipping working schedules. He does not answer but with hermetic bitterness climbs back atop his scaffold, for he is a worker with every day a day's work ahead....
>
> Have patience; you will die. So will those officials and cashiers.... This wall will witness comical scenes, lay processions, guide books in hand, gaping in awe at the Old Master. Ciceroni will earn their penny. Statues will perpetuate this flesh of yours in the rhomboid shape it had. You will be well-haloed, subjected to political speeches and art historians.[13]

Daniel Cosío Villegas recorded the turning point: "The work

12. "Impresiones sobre el arte actual de México," *México Moderno*, Oct. 1922.
13. English translation in Charlot, *Art From the Mayans to Disney*, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1939.

took over one year. Only his intimates and disciples could watch the growth of the decoration. A little less than three months ago the auditorium was open to the public, and the work of Rivera stirred deep emotions."[14]

They were mixed emotions. The average reaction as the public at large came in contact with "Creation" is best summed up by an editorial in *El Demócrata* of July 5, 1923:

> We do not side with those spectators who claim that they cannot follow the trend of the lectures and speeches given in the Auditorium of the Preparatoria, because they puzzle or laugh themselves to death looking at those futuristic jokes.... But we do resent for the thousandth and one time the dead loss in these works of much that is good, of much intelligence and much effort.... What seems unfair to us is that such attempts and trailblazing happen in conditions that do not allow turning back.

At least one painter was also skeptical. In a cryptic series of aphorisms probably prepared for *La Falange,* a literary magazine that suspended publication before the series could be published, José Clemente Orozco wrote:

> Incomprehensible are those pseudocubistic pictures done according to so-called "scientific" recipes imported from Paris. No one understands such painting, not even he who makes it.
>
> Some verses are spelled very nicely and polished magnificently, yet they are worth a peanut. Some paintings boast of the golden proportion and that famous cubistic technique; they are worth another peanut.[15]

14. "La Pintura en México."
15. Unpublished manuscript.

CHAPTER 12

"Dieguitos"

As a dispenser of public moneys, Vasconcelos was pledged to use recognized talent on the walls of public buildings rather than to engage in unlabeled aesthetic adventures. The taxpayer would have been less reluctant to back mural commissions had they been given to painters of a conservative breed.

The politician Vasconcelos was no Bohemian intent on scandalizing the bourgeois voter but was, rather, in favor of an artistic middle course. It was economic factors more than his personal judgment that settled stylistic matters along extreme lines; in other words, it was the very weakness of the economic lever that spelled, in this instance, a guaranty of quality.

According to Fernando Leal:

> Desirous of stimulating painting in the grand manner, José Vasconcelos offered to a number of artists, whose names were more in evidence than their work, the decoration of the Auditorium of the Preparatoria School. For sundry reasons none of them dared face such a problem. The proposition was then broached to painter Diego Rivera, just returned from Europe, who accepted with alacrity.[1]

Rivera wrote cryptically of that unpoised moment when the Secretary, with quasi-biological broad-mindedness, let the law of natural selection shape the dominant character of the mural movement to be:

1. "El '93' de la pintura Mexicana," unpublished manuscript, written around 1934.

> A united front against this kind of modern painting was plotted. It welded together those who did not understand, those who bore grudges, and more than one painter weaned on the meringue that was the creation and specialty of the fashionable pastry cook who clogs the boudoirs of our lamentable mammons with pastels of drooping flowers. The fossil remnants of the older school joined them.... All attacked in close formation, and it is only justice to state that the intelligent Secretary helped the besieged with a gift worth a rampart of barbed wires when he offered work on equal terms to the attackers. As a result the attackers dispersed.[2]

To climb ladders, perch on planks, and paint by the square yard for a house painter's wage proved unattractive to men whose vested interests now outweighed a lust for adventure. Though they were, indeed, a more imposing host than the besieged, their withdrawal assured a predominance of moderns among the muralists.

The Secretary was now forced to fall back on painters mostly untried and unknown. As Fernando Leal wrote:

> A few days later, Vasconcelos, on the lookout for fresh contingents, called me to his office—I was only a student at the open air school of Coyoacán—and said: "I want you also to shoulder the task of decorating the Preparatoria. Paint what you like, and in the medium that you deem most suitable. I leave you entire freedom of judgment, because, come tomorrow, I do not want you, the painters, to excuse your own mistakes by advancing the argument that such and such subject matter, such and such technique, were forced upon you."
>
> He also asked me to invite in his name those of my comrades that I judged capable of executing a mural decoration, as well as of understanding the transcendency of the new position that opened before us.
>
> Of the young painters whom I invited, the only ones bold enough to accept the offer were: Ramón Alva de la Canal,

2 "Diego de Rivera discute," *El Demócrata*, March 2, 1924.

> Fermín Revueltas, Emilio García Cahero, and a French student who worked in my studio, called Jean Charlot.[3]

It is undeniable that we were very young. D. H. Lawrence surveyed us with disdain: "The artists were at work on the frescoes... But they were men—or boys—whose very pigment seemed to exist to *épater le bourgeois*."[4] Gruening spoke with tenderness: "In every corner the younger painters, some of them little more than boys, are at work painting—painting with a verve unknown elsewhere—working all of them as craftsmen for day wages, humble wages, and glorying in their opportunity."[5]

If youth was held against us, so was the proximity of Rivera, painting in the auditorium while we tackled the entrance hall and staircase of the school. The master was proceeding ponderously with his encaustic, attended by devoted helpers, myself among them, and though the murals were separate enterprises governed by distinct contracts, people took it for granted that all the works were Diego Rivera's.

Charles Michel gives a sympathetic version of the popular belief: "Adolescents with peaceful and introspective features—their eyes are pregnant with visions of the future. Guided by the chieftain's soul, they burn ablaze with the same sacred flame, live, act, and produce with the same faith, exhale with fervor the same ideal."[6]

Soon we were nicknamed "Dieguitos" (little Diegos) and made the butt of jokes and adverse critical comments. A blanket estimate, by Guillermo Jiménez, sums it up: "Diego Rivera is without a doubt the painter most in the vanguard. He is much, very much, gifted, and also somewhat of a practical joker. His poor imitators copy only his defects."[7] Diego admitted to something of the sort, stating coyly of the group: "Their talent adapted itself to the constructive discipline imposed by the decoration of the Auditorium."[8]

3. "El '93.'"
4. *The Plumed Serpent*, New York, Knopf, 1926.
5. "Mexican Renaissance," *Century Magazine*, Feb. 1924.
6. In *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*, 1 (1923), 369.
7. Interview with Jiménez by Ortega, in "La Obra admirable de Diego Rivera," *El Universal Ilustrado*, March 15, 1923.
8. "De Pintura," *La Falange*, Aug. 1, 1923.

While older and wiser men had modestly refused the invitation of the Secretary, awed as they were by the splendid sturdiness of the eighteenth-century architecture and the time-hallowed history of the school, the five adolescents felt no qualms. Charles Michel was their witness: "'In truth,' said one of those young heroes of noble mien, 'this building is ours and we shall not retreat until all its walls are covered with our paintings!' And the group stands hypnotized, facing the vastness of the halls, and seeing with eyes full of splendorous dreams a glorious and triumphant mirage instead of those grey drab walls."[9]

Ramón Alva and Fermín Revueltas decided on the two arched panels at the sides of the main door that faced each other across a narrow corridor. Leal and I paired up on twin walls at the top of the main stairway. Cahero chose a smaller panel with scalloped outline at the right of the entrance to the same stairway.

At the end of 1922 two panels, Cahero's and mine, were practically finished. Sóstenes Ortega stated in December of that year, using the past tense: "Cahero has nearly finished the mural panel assigned to him at the entrance of one of the stairways... The French painter Charlot has decorated one of the walls in the upper corridors in this peculiar style of his that seems so strange to us, and at times extravagant."[10]

The three remaining panels lagged at the cartoon stage, and their execution dates rather from 1923. Ortega noted in December 1922: "Leal has scarcely begun to draw the geometric outline of figures on the wall to which he was assigned. Revueltas is already beginning work on the coloring, but only on two or three of the figures."[11] The state of Alva's work is not mentioned, but five months later, on June 7, 1923, Renato Molina Enríquez published a photograph of the still unfinished panel captioned: "Detail of the fresco with which Ramón Alva is decorating one of the walls of the Preparatoria School."[12] By then, however, the panel was close to completion.

9. In *Boletín.*
10. "La Pintura y escultura en 1922," *El Universal Ilustrado,* Dec. 28, 1922.
11. Ibid.
12. "Fresco II," *El Universal Ilustrado,* June 7, 1923.

In spite of contemporaneous adverse criticism and the bypassing of their murals by tourists, the Dieguitos exerted a lasting influence both on the form and on the content of the Mexican mural renaissance. The complete rerouting of Rivera's talent after his first mural suggested to Bertram Wolfe that the Byzantino-cubist "Creation" be labeled "a false start." In fact the nude or draped allegories brusquely gave way in Rivera's next work to folk themes steeped in Mexicanism, or rather in Indianism. This abrupt turnabout within a few months was made plausible by the spadework of the younger painters, who were facing Mexico squarely while the older master still squinted at Italian grandeur.

It was Revueltas in his "Devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe" who first used the hieratic, white-clad Indian and the women wrapped in stylized rebozos that soon became the accepted ciphers of a Mexican mural alphabet. The prototype of the courts of the ministry—filled with the depiction of folk festivals, pilgrimages, ritual dancers, with an accent on picturesque clothes and customs —is Leal's "Pilgrimage of Chalma," the ideation of which was simultaneous with the execution of the Italianate "Creation." The historical epic—theme of Rivera's Cuernavaca frescoes and the staircase of the National Palace—was treated years before in my 1922 "Massacre in the Main Temple," which presented for the first time on a wall the personae of a drama—robot knights trampling upon Indian victims—that was to rate many an encore.

Some of these first murals pointed a way that is still to be trod. Cahero and Alva, treating the colonial period with respect, prophetically underlined the hiatus in the historical content of the walls that came afterward and that cleared the hurdle of a few centuries to telescope, dogmatically, conquest into revolution.

While Rivera painted the auditorium safely under lock and key, it was again the five young men who inaugurated the era of painting in public, sometimes under heroic conditions, and who received the brunt of an indignation carried to the point of mayhem. When this way of working became the rule, the violence of these early encounters had abated. Charles Michel preserved the 1922 tenseness in a contemporary account of what happened to the five boys:

> This new movement started handicapped by derision and catcalls, sarcasm and disdain. Missiles began to fly, paper wads and chewing gum and spittle stuck to the pictures, while from the scaffolds fell curses and colors splashed from loaded brushes whirling menacingly. There were acts of vandalism. Intruders swooping in sudden raids climbed up to the frescoes, painting in the circles that marked the places where heads would be, grotesque noses and comical eyes. The besieged raised sturdy barricades, but they proved unable to stop the attackers. The painters fortified the banisters and the stairs with tacks, and behind this screen carried on their great decorations.[13]

It would be misleading to represent the painters as totally helpless before the students' onslaughts, or as the pious addicts of nonviolent resistance, and sometimes heavy reinforcements rushed to the rescue. Sculptor Nacho Asúnsolo reminisces:

> You all never realized it, but it was I who saved your life and your walls. The students of the Preparatoria had decided to tar and feather you painters; there were the buckets of tar in readiness and heaps of feathers. I contacted Vasconcelos about it, and he gave me carte blanche to create a diversion.
>
> While the students were on the lookout for you, I entered the school through the side door of the *Colegio Chico*, surrounded by a group of trusted friends, all of them master gunmen. I held a pistol in each hand and started firing at random, meanwhile screaming curses and "Viva Villa's." My posse followed my lead, and the would-be lynchers scurried away.
>
> That same morning a few students came back to pick up off the pavement a sackful of empty shells, and rushed to the Ministry with the still warm evidence. Vasconcelos received them without delay. They dumped the cartridges on top of the ministerial desk, commenting in a hurt tone: "Licenciado, look at the caliber of the artists you sponsor." Retorted the Secretary, "I need more men like Asúnsolo."

13. In *Boletín*

From the same period and the same men dates a technical step without which the Mexican renaissance is hardly conceivable: a revival of true fresco painting. At the time that the Dieguitos were given walls to paint, Rivera spoke well of fresco but feared it as impermanent on a mural scale. In May 1922 del Sena asked him: "Please tell me what means the kind of fresco with which you are going to decorate the Auditorium, Diegote, and how you are going to paint it?" And he replied: "In encaustic. I decided upon this technique because it outlasts fresco, though the latter remains ideal for decoration and painting. In Pompeii and in Greece, not a single fresco is left standing."

It required stubbornness on the part of the Dieguitos to disagree with Rivera on the point of permanency and to probe the possibilities of adapting the classical medium to an exotic milieu and new social content. Starting with tests on small areas, the search resulted in the first two *buon frescoes* to be painted on a mural scale, in the training of native masons in the forgotten craft, and in a substantial precedent that smoothed the way for the many who were to follow our trail. My diary entry for June 24, 1922, "Trial frescoes are made," refers to the sketches that "the group" painted that day on the walls and columns of the backroom workshop of the auditorium, where patches of discoloration still mark the places.

When Siqueiros returned from Europe in September 1922, there was still time to witness the end of the fresco hunt:

> Charlot told us about Cennino Cennini, and how in the past this Italian master had been the only man with practical experience to write on technical procedures. A few among us admitted knowing of the work but had no chance to read it. Diego Rivera, whom you all know, swore that he had studied it. But because it treated of physical formulas, one could do nothing until one had the book in hand.
>
> Our password became, "Search for Cennino Cennini," and in our perquisitions we invaded public libraries, big and small private libraries; we scrutinized the stalls of outdoor vendors, the baskets of book peddlers—all without success, the painting

> treatise of Cennini remaining elusive. We ended by violently swearing at all bourgeois bibliophiles who hoarded books privately for the one purpose of sabotaging our effort.
>
> What could be done minus Cennini? Of what use were the walls already chosen? Lacking an adequate procedure, would we remain doomed to dumbness? I do not remember how, but the work we had hoped for unto despair was produced—an edition written in a most obsolete Italian nearly impossible to decipher. The formulas mentioned ingredients unknown or so archaic as not to be had in our milieu crammed with imported industrial products. The extraordinary discovery failed to solve our problem.[14]

In the end, the hazards incipient in the use of an untried medium, and Diego's impressive demonstration of the qualities of the encaustic medium, swung Revueltas, Cahero, and Leal to his side. Only Alva and I stuck to fresco.

In the following chapters Ramón Alva de la Canal, Fernando Leal, and I relate some of the experiences we went through while painting our first murals. The two other painters of the group, Cahero and Revueltas, are dead, and their story cannot be told as directly as ours.

The least known of the group is Emilio García Cahero. While the four others went on painting murals that add significance to their first ones, Cahero painted only this one. The pioneer panel on a colonial theme had a short existence. It got in the way of José Clemente Orozco in 1926. Having secured written permission from its author to destroy it, Clemente painted in its place the fresco of "The Engineers," still extant.

Though it adds little to Cahero's stature as a muralist, I quote an acid-etched word sketch of the man as Leal remembers him:

> He was a tall strapping male with an impressive, expensive-looking red beard and an inordinate fondness for nobility. His father's name was Cuervo, but he used his mother's as more

14. Siqueiros, "Autobiografía."

suitable. Yet he was reluctant to acknowledge her. When asked by friends "Is she your mother?" he would say "Why no, my mother lives in her family castle in Spain; this is my old nurse."

He also said that he was descended from a certain Marquess de Pomarini, and even designed a spectacular coat of arms with the motto: "Dios mediante, Pomarini adelante!"—that is, "With God's aid, Pomarini ahead!"

He lived poorly in one room on an *azotea*, with a devoted mistress who fed his hunting dogs and polished his hunting knives, and dusted a glass case containing a de luxe set of fishing rods, tourniquets, and lures meant for deep sea fishing. Playing with them like toys, Cahero proudly displayed them to guests: "Look at this one wiggle, and see how this other is phosphorescent in the dark."

He subscribed to magazines on hunting, boating, and fishing, and knew the plan and cost of most famous yachts, Rockefeller's included. He carted stout pieces of good timber to his roof and started building a boat whose plan included a storeroom for his fishing equipment and a cabin-atelier in case he felt like painting on a cruise. One day he asked, "Do you want to join me on the great adventure?" As I agreed, he unrolled nautical charts all pocked with marks and explained the itinerary: we would sail southward, turn Cape Horn, and reach San Francisco. There was no plan as to how the boat was to leave the roof for the sea.

He was first among the painters to carry a pistol, and would give his girls firearms etched with his own designs. One day in the Academy of San Carlos, a jealous one shot him with his love gift, a tiny ebony-handled revolver. She let her hair down and screamed: "I have killed him." We whisked her away before Cahero recovered from his faint.

He promised to marry her. The wedding was to be a period affair, she in a crinoline and he in a lavender suit with a cream derby. He began carving the nuptial bed. It had as uprights four helmets with flowing panaches, and the arms and motto of the Pomarinis scattered all over. It took him so long to sculpture it

> that the girl lost interest, but his concentration on the bed did not falter for that.
>
> I suggested that the time had passed for such medieval displays and that social currents flowed to the left. "Why, that is fine," he said. "It is well known that all revolutions are the work of the aristocracy under the cloak of Masonry." He became a Mason, switched his activities to the carving of Masonic necklaces and emblems to wear at seances, while his girls were put to work on similar embroideries. He would not speak to me any more, suspecting me of being a reactionary.

Cahero was unusually gifted with his hands, and gave good advice concerning techniques. When I was in Coyoacán he taught me drypoint, and the first state of my first plate was dedicated to him.

Fermín Revueltas, the youngest of the group, was twenty-one years old at the time that he received his first mural commission. The splendid chromatic chords that he brushed effortlessly and unfailingly in his easel work bespoke the born painter. Revueltas rendered nature with an *a la prima* swing of a brush freely motored from shoulder and elbow, to the scandal of his more modish colleagues who, mistrusting the quota of unknown in the build-up of the human machine, kept pointedly to ruler and compass.

Though the youngest, he was already well known and his pictures were a hit in group shows. Famous for extrapictorial reasons was a still life of edibles, including a menu with only one printed item on it: "Merde pour les bourgeois." Siqueiros remembers that

> His love of physical activity always ended in physical scuffles with the police. One day he calmly planted Rivera and me in front of the doors of City Hall, from which vantage point police squads were firing guns and machine guns at an avalanche of rebellious workers, who in turn were ready to set fire to the building in revenge for increased taxes and lack of water. When Rivera fainted from what he thought was a shot in the head—but which proved to be a glass sliver through his hat—it was Revueltas who dragged his enormous bulk out of the fray.[15]

15. Ibid.

Revueltas and Alva finished their murals together. The event is recorded in a terse entry in my diary: "June 24, 1923, Lunch in honor of Alva and Revueltas. We get drunk." Perhaps because our tongues were thick, the usual speeches were replaced by a visit to the brand-new murals and a few inarticulate quadrille figures, after which the two honored guests were made to run a gauntlet of mural-size brushes.

Revueltas' encaustic mural is still in place but it is hard to discover. The main entrance that it adorns is now condemned, and the space is used instead for storing heavy material and closed with an iron grill. Now the only light comes from the patio entrance to the narrow hall. As is the case with Rivera's encaustic, the colors seem to have become dull and opaque. To remember what it looked like when new we must turn to a description by Renato Molina Enríquez, published in July 1923:

> Dominating the composition, a creole Virgin, la Guadalupe, is seen in front view, her tunic between pink and mauve, her mantle of a dark olive green, human in spite of the hieratic subject. On the sides, on a lower level, two angels with adolescent features... and at the base of the composition, Indians with peaceful features and relaxed attitudes, holding in their hands the fruits of the earth... In the costumes, deep yellow ochres contrast with sepias and cafés, browns with purples and red ochres, and many hues of green—bronze green, olive green, emerald green, and light greens. Also varied are the cobalts, mauves, and pale lilacs.[16] [Figs. 25a, 25b]

One critical estimate of Revueltas' encaustic was uttered while it was still in the making. Sometime in the spring of 1923, Rivera sent for me: the greatest writer in the English tongue wished to make the tour of our few murals. Could I, who spoke the language, show him around and take him off Rivera's hands? I could think only of Shakespeare.

Tall, stooped, with a peculiar twist of the chin that caught his

16. "Los Nuevos Valores de la pintura Mexicana—Fermín Revueltas," *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 26, 1923.

short red beard inside a loose high collar, the famous guest arrived with a court of shorter Anglo-Saxons eagerly, yet timidly, crowding behind. As we made the rounds of our decorated patios, they all greeted my sober talk with puzzled silence. Only before the last wall visited, that of Revueltas, did the head man reward us with one word: "Gauguin!" At least one of his court was disappointed. Fred Leighton wrote soon after:

> Mr. D. H. Lawrence, the novelist, when in Mexico City, visited the National Preparatory School to see the mural decorations with which the walls of that building are being covered by young native painters under the leadership of Diego Rivera. Mr. Lawrence disposed of them in an offhand manner: "Bah, imitations of Gauguin." One is reminded of another Englishman who, picking up a copy of the Bhakgavad Gita, remarked, "Some more of that Blavatsky stuff."[17]

Only time and the fading away of our generation will bring forward the importance of Revueltas' *oeuvre*, overshadowed to this day by his peculiar deeds. One such incident illustrates the human side of the relations between artists and patron in a Mexico less complex than that of today, where a Secretary could still find time to be patriarchal. The painter Roberto Reyes Pérez remembers:

> Máximo Pacheco and I helped Revueltas in the Preparatoria. One time Vasconcelos arrived on a check-up tour of the murals, only to find Revueltas away and sixteen-year-old Pacheco painting in his stead. Fumed Vasconcelos: "So the masters do nothing and the helpers do the work of the masters. What is your name, boy?" Said little Pacheco, with humble Indian demeanor: "I won't say, Señor Secretary, because if I do my Señor Revueltas would scold me." "Very well then. I will ask the janitor!" Don Trini docilely gave the information. "Well, from now on, Pacheco, you receive the salary instead of Revueltas!"
>
> Frightened Pacheco kept very mum concerning the incident, and next payday Revueltas queued with everybody to the

17. "Rivera's Mural Paintings," *International Studio*, Feb. 1924.

window of the paymaster only to be gruffly told: "Not any more. By order of the Secretary your salary has been transferred to a certain Señor Pacheco." So from then on, Revueltas sent little Pacheco to queue in his place every payday, and would pounce upon him at his return and take all the money for himself, less his helper's usual weekly earnings of one peso.

Vasconcelos heard of this and came a second time, and shouted to Pacheco, as usual perched high on a plank at his work: "Hey there, silly boy, so you give your money to Revueltas. Well then, from now on, neither one of you gets anything!"

Siqueiros tells the sequel:

Revueltas staged one of the most original strikes on record, that of one man against thousands. Because the Ministry was behind in its paychecks, he threw out, pistol in hand, the janitor and handymen from the immense school building.

This successfully done, he closed the enormous doors, secured them solidly from the inside, hoisted up the red and black flag of syndical struggle, and paced like a sentinel on the ledge of the roof to the amazement of the passers-by and of the locked-out students and teachers. None could make out what the reason could be for such a bizarre demonstration.

Secretary Vasconcelos, furious at first, experienced a good-humored reaction and gave orders to give in to the energetic revindication of the lonely striker. I was chosen to bring friend Revueltas the corresponding emoluments. The heavy doors opened, the fight banner was lowered, and it goes without saying that the spoils of victory were drunk by Revueltas and me in less time than the cock crows.[18]

18. "Autobiografía."

CHAPTER 13

Reminiscences: Fernando Leal

Fernando Leal was kind enough to write especially for this book the important statement that follows, translated here from the original Spanish. Together with the two following chapters, written by Ramón Alva de la Canal and myself, it clarifies one of the earliest and least known phases of the mural renaissance.

Though they cover mostly the same happenings, it will be noticed that the three accounts disagree at times. However, as all three are of an autobiographical nature and written in good faith, no attempt was made to smooth over the discrepancies.

José Vasconcelos was brimming over with projects and with initiative. His impulse animated a good many, for he was not one to let dreams and projects vanish, but worked energetically to see them realized. He was looking for someone to paint the interior of the auditorium of the National Preparatoria School, where he intended to start an active program of theater and music.

As I understand it, he offered the job to Don Germán Gedovius, considered the best teacher at the school of San Carlos. Gedovius was then a man somewhat advanced in years and rather lonely because of a congenital deafness. He had spent his life teaching and painting commissioned portraits in the manner of Lenbach and of Kaulbach whom he had learned to admire in Munich where most of his youth was spent. In answer to this offer, he admitted that he was incapable of carrying through a large-size mural painting.

This news reached us in our disturbed retreat of Coyoacán through Alfredo Ramos Martínez, who, gathering us to talk one afternoon as was his habit, added:

Vasconcelos wants the auditorium of the Preparatoria decorated. He asked me to take charge of the work, but how can I climb scaffolds with my weak stomach? Otherwise I would paint a group of women weaving garlands of roses beneath an autumnal sky.

After I declined the responsibility, Vasconcelos suggested that I invite you all in case anybody should be interested. He understands that you are the hope of Mexican art today, and he means to grant you an opportunity. But remember, commissions are always commissions, that is, compromises, and true art is never achieved by compromise, regardless with whom.

As a rule government commissions are the worst all the world over. Secretaries of State always insist on an image of Abundance, that is a female with a horn of plenty full of fruits, or some such allegory involving women with balances or trumpets or cogwheels.

True art is done facing Nature. A garden corner painted by Monet will always be worth more than all the *grandes machines* of Jean-Paul Laurens or Paul Delaroche. An artist need not turn flatterer or concede points to the powerful. Do you think that the artists of the Renaissance elbowed princes and tycoons? Well, you are wrong. Tintoretto and the like were shy workers who ate cheese on bread.

To labor humbly but facing Nature, just as you are doing now, has always been the norm for great artists. Of course, if any one of you needs a little money and wants to paint in the auditorium, tell me about it and I will gladly convey the message to the president of the university.

Naturally, none among the poor apprentices who heard this extraordinary speech was bold enough to proclaim on the spot an ugly craving to paint a commissioned wall. But the next day, after much indecision and without preliminary consultation, Alva and I, each for himself, went to speak with our master Ramos Martínez.

What happened with Alva, I do not know. In my case, Ramos, as was his habit, gave me confidence with light and gracious words

and told me to make a sketch which he would take to the president.

In a few days I realized that Alva was my only competitor, having seen him tacking big sheets of wrapping paper on a wall and sketching nude figures on a heroic scale—something that was unusual in our naturalist school, from which nudes had been excluded as unnatural.

As for myself, I made a number of sketches in my house but none was to my satisfaction.

About this time Diego Rivera returned from Europe, fleeing from the postwar disorder. A mature artist, Rivera returned after fifteen or eighteen years of living in Spain and in France. His arrival was anticipated with curiosity, since it was heralded by a well-directed publicity campaign in the press. Also his type and habits of dressing were always good for attracting attention.

I remember that soon after he arrived he paid a visit to the school of Coyoacán, only to let us know, in no uncertain terms, that what we were doing was rather insignificant. He spoke with great complacency of cubism and of the fourth dimension. Before leaving, though, he admitted to some interest in a picture by Ramón Cano which he said looked like a Douanier Rousseau, and he asked to have it as a gift from its author. Less warmly, he endorsed a picture of mine which represented artichoke plants. Then he left with his picture by the new Rousseau under his arm, looking very much like an Argentine horse trader.

I soon heard that Vasconcelos had offered the auditorium to Rivera and that he had accepted it with alacrity.

This was the state of affairs when Charlot and I became friends. Naturally Charlot was curious to visit Mexican studios and we went to those of the more famous among my acquaintances. Arriving one day at the studio of Rivera in the building of San Pedro y San Pablo, I saw with my own eyes that he was working on sketches for the main wall of the auditorium. I was sad, and felt that I had lost an opportunity which I believed would not come again. Charlot and I paid sporadic visits to the studio of Diego Rivera, who seemed to enjoy our company and talking with us in French, a habit he acquired during his long stay in Paris.

Even though the opportunity of painting a wall was apparently gone, the idea of great monumental painting haunted us. To paint small landscapes directly from nature left us dissatisfied, and so we focused above all on problems of composition.

One day, in the Coyoacán studio, I began a large picture representing a Zapatista camp. Charlot, also wishing to paint something monumental and to practice oil painting which he had not yet attempted, began an enormous picture with a religious theme, in which he boldly used the anathematized black. This orientation of our works in the impressionistic surroundings of Coyoacán soon created such a hostile feeling among our companions that day after day we found insulting words scrawled on our studio door.

The climax was reached when we began to make woodcuts, a technique which Charlot had learned in his country and used with skill. The scandal became boundless. We painted without models and proclaimed composition as uppermost in a picture. We engraved on wood, which was tantamount to bringing art from its height to the level of the *corridos* of Vanegas Arroyo. Worse still, we courted culture by reading all sorts of books when the proper course of an artist is to be genuinely ignorant and to paint only from nature.

The mounting hostility would have resulted in our being forced to leave the school had it not been for an event as theatrical as any that fate ever produced to enliven life, and which so changed our positions that we were able to leave as if going off to some marvelous adventure.

Vasconcelos used to pay unheralded visits to the school. One day during a surprise tour with the director, they came into my studio and stopped before an unfinished picture of Zapatistas. At the time I was the first to paint a revolutionary theme, to everybody's disgust and especially to that of Ramos Martínez, who couldn't understand why anyone would paint an Indian with a cartridge belt and pistol when it was more like Millet to paint him holding a folk vase.

To the dismay of all present, Vasconcelos stated that I could paint on the walls of the Preparatoria, and invited me to see him at his office at the university the next day.

Once there, he told me to chose the walls I wanted and left me

free as to theme and technique. He also asked me to invite those among my companions whom I considered ready to face mural problems, adding: "I have already told Diego Rivera to invite young artists interested in mural problems, but Diego has never invited anybody."

I passed the invitation on to my friends of Coyoacán: Fermín Revueltas, Ramón Alva de la Canal, Emilio García Cahero, Enrique Ugarte—who refused because he lacked the nerve to approach such a difficult problem—and Mateo Bolaños, who also declined the offer because of a morbid sensitivity that had already predisposed him to the madness which was soon to destroy him. He said that he could not work near Diego Rivera because Diego's hyena laugh gave him an almost physical pain. Needless to say, I invited Jean Charlot at the very beginning. He was, however, nearly rejected by Vasconcelos because he was a foreigner, but I went to see Diego Rivera and with his help moved Vasconcelos to a warmer reception.

We all set to work full of optimism. Charlot and I chose two walls facing each other on the third ramp of the main stairway of the Preparatoria, and by mutual agreement decided on the themes we would use and the scale we would give to the figures, so that there would be unity to the work.

Jean decided upon a picture of the violent imposition of European culture by the Spaniards upon the Indians. For this purpose he chose the historical episode of the massacre of Indians perpetrated by Pedro de Alvarado in the main Temple of Tenochtitlan. I felt no inclination toward historical themes and wanted at all cost to paint something more genuinely Mexican. So I chose a modern scene of a ritual dance inside a church, assuring myself that such a scene was a symbol of the survival of native modes within the Catholic rites and thus a complement of the theme adopted by my neighbor muralist. I based my interpretation on an anecdote told by my brother of a curious incident which took place in a village church in the mountains of Puebla, a story later transmitted by Charlot to Anita Brenner, and which served as the leitmotiv of her book *Idols behind Altars:* During the course of a religious dance around the statue of the Virgin, the concussion caused the image to fall down in its glass

case, leaving exposed a small figurine carved in stone of the goddess of water, which had been hidden since time immemorial under the rich mantle of Our Lady. True or not, this incident became an ideological justification for my picture.

To document myself on the costumes and steps, I made friends with a leader of dancers who let me witness the rehearsals of the brotherhood. Also Luciana, an Indian girl who had posed for many of my pictures, took me to her village to gather further data. My models had always been Indians, but the more I saw them the more interested I became, and I ended by feeling a true friendship for them, although I do not mean to sound condescending. I aimed at giving their racial types a monumentality undiluted by occidental standards (Figs. 26a, 26b).

As to the composition itself, Jean and I both decided to use masses arranged along the diagonals of the mural polygon. Charlot solved his problem with elegant airiness, and our dissensions began when he tried to impose his criterion and his taste on the solution of my composition. At the time nothing grave came between us, and I doggedly followed the way I thought best.

When our projects were ready we asked Carlos Mérida, who prepared colors for Diego, to give us the ingredients of encaustic, Diego's own medium. Mérida answered, in the mysterious tone of voice due to his deafness, that Diego had forbidden him to reveal the secrets of his technique.

Given this impasse, we thought of fresco. Ramón Alva de la Canal, Charlot, and I decided to investigate the medium for our own benefit, since our other companions seemed to make light of the serious problem at hand.

To show his good will, Carlos Mérida suggested as a processing for the wall the same priming that he used for his canvases, Spanish white and fish glue. The naïve attempt made with this formula proved disastrous, as can be easily understood. On the other hand there was not a painting teacher at the school of San Carlos able to help us out of our quandary, for none had considered monumental possibilities and as a result mural techniques were ignored.

I began to wonder if architectural experts, who might be expected

to have read Vitruvius and others, would know any traditional formulas connected with the art of building. I asked some architectural students who they thought was the most experienced master in such matters and all agreed that it was Professor Ruiz, who was supervising the rebuilding of the City Hall in our main plaza.

Alva and I went to the office of this most distinguished man, and having curtsied and said three times over: "Master, great master, sublime master," I bluntly asked if he could explain what procedure one should follow to paint in fresco, or if he could at least suggest some work of reference.

Professor Ruiz, with an amiability that did not exclude a feeling of his own importance, answered that fresco painting was impossible to practice in our climate and that furthermore it required such extraordinary dexterity that even Michelangelo was not completely successful in its practice. In a word, he made us conscious of our foolhardiness in wanting to paint a wall without first having studied at the school of San Carlos. He ended by graciously suggesting the use of "Alabastina" paints, a United States product that was sold cheap in paint stores, and which had the astonishing advantage of being washable and prepared in graded tones, thus making it easy to harmonize our color scheme, a useful quality given our total ignorance of the rules. I confess that what Alva and I said outside the architect's office is unfit for publication.[1]

The next step was books, and Sr. Picaseño, librarian of the School of Fine Arts, proudly put in our hands the treatises of Pacheco and of Palomino, a small part of the treasures entrusted to his care. At a French bookshop I also found Vibert's *La Science de la peinture,* a work that I had seen at Rivera's. To my surprise, I found that the author,

1. In the Archives of the San Carlos School there is the carbon copy of a letter from Ramos Martínez to Ruiz about this visit. 1922, Folder 12, "Correspondencia del Director."

> Mexico, July 10, 1922.
> To Señor Arquitecto Luis R. Ruiz.
>
> Cherished Master
>
> This letter will introduce my esteemed friend, Señor Fernando Leal, who wishes to ask your advice concerning mortars. I will appreciate your receiving him with your customary amiability.

a chemist of the Lefranc firm, gave the formula for the encaustic painting Rivera was using, and which he claimed to have discovered by studying Pompeian murals.

How ingenuous we were in those marvelous years! The foreword to the book was a diatribe against fresco painting, which the author called a barbarous and poor technique, the same words that were ironically used by Rivera each time he heard of our desire to renovate the one mural technique par excellence.

Now that we had access to the encaustic formula we longed for, we all decided to use it, including Revueltas and Cahero. Through my friend the French bookseller, I obtained *El Libro del arte* by Cennino Cennini, where we found a factual description of the same technique. I also consulted a curious book of the eighteenth century from my uncle's library, with the following title page:

SECRETOS
DE ARTES
LIBERALES
Y MECANICAS.
RECOPILADOS, Y TRADUCIDOS
de varios y selectos Authores, que tratan
de Phisica, Pintura,
Arquitectura, Optica, Chimica, Doradura, y Charoles,
con otras varias curiosidades
ingeniosas.
SU AUTHOR
EL LICIENCIADO D. BERNARDO
Monton.
CON PRIVILEGIO.
En Madrid: En la oficina de Antonio Marin, año
de M.DCC.XXXIV.
Vendese en casa de los herederos de Francisco Medel del Castillo,
Mercader de Libros, frente de San Félipe el Real.

In this tome sieved with wormholes I found a clear explanation of the way to paint on fresh mortar, and passed on the information to my friends.

With this accumulated documentation we were now ready to try out the process, and we asked José Vasconcelos for a mason and

some lime and sand. Overruling the opposition of the engineer Méndez Rivas, who was in charge of the work of the new ministry building, Vasconcelos gave the order that our requests be granted. With lime badly slaked and sand badly washed we tried to make some experiments. Diego moved in, anxious to retain at all costs the rating of master. Passing himself off as very learned in the matter, he assured us that the Italian masons he had seen at work kneaded the mortar with their hands and laid it on the wall with their fingers. We soon realized that this was ignorance, or worse, bad faith.

We continued experimenting on our own and, at last, we had success. The head of one of my dancers, with its plumes and accessories, was painted on one of the pillars of what is today the vestibule of the auditorium. As the result was good, Jean suggested that we change our plan and paint in fresco instead of encaustic, which meant simplifying the color scheme of our sketches. I refused because I disliked the idea of limiting my color range, a grave error attributable to a lack of experience, since I then failed to realize the richness of the palette of the fresco painter. I persisted in wanting to paint in encaustic, with the feeling that I might not have another chance to use this expensive process.

The obstinacy that I inherited from some Basque ancestors made me part from my great friend Charlot who, in turn, refusing to see my point of view, started painting his wall in fresco, modifying as a result the color scheme we had agreed upon. Charlot's decision, magnified by the lens of adolescent passion, seemed like black treason to me, and from that moment on, our relations became almost belligerent.

The situation was strained further when David Alfaro Siqueiros, my friend from childhood, arrived in Mexico, returning from a secretarial post with the Mexican legation in Madrid, which he had held for three or four years. He came with his head full of socializing ideas. Vasconcelos gave him walls to paint, and he soon proposed the foundation of a syndicate of free plastic workers, increasing our dissension, which the hypocritical Diego watched and even encouraged.

Violently upset, I resigned from the Syndicate, with a resulting

boycott by friends who, in the kind of hysteria that gripped us, had forgotten that I was the one who had selected them from among all others to benefit by Vasconcelos' invitation. But such considerations at that moment would have been labeled as weak sentimentality.

My helper thought it proper to exercise direct action by breaking the glasses that contained my pigments and disappearing with my brushes and my compass set. The material damage could be easily repaired, but I understood then how our dissensions would end by slowing the work of renovation and putting our future as artists in jeopardy.

To such immature professional resentment and internecine strife were added the hostility and lack of understanding of the teachers and students of the Preparatoria School.

As for me, I lost the treasured friendship of Charlot when an inopportune meddler assured me, something I should never have believed, that Charlot, who finished his work before the others, had made efforts to convince the Secretary to take away my contract to paint the wall facing his. I burst into a fit of rage, and Charlot, showing more fortitude than I, received my insults stoically.

We can never overstate the harm that we brought upon ourselves by such clashes of capricious temperaments, moved as we were by childish tantrums and converted into the pawns of one who was interested in splitting us apart, perhaps in order the better to destroy us.

At one time things skirted true tragedy. After a banquet given for José Vasconcelos, the sculptor Nacho Asúnsolo, with pistol in hand, attempted to force me to ask Charlot's forgiveness for having offended him. Such procedure was the least apt to bring about a reconciliation. Following my decisive refusal, Nacho, who was slightly drunk, fired a shot whose aim, fortunately for me, was deflected by the friendly hand of Miguel Othón de Mendizábal.

Without wanting it to be so, our inexperience and slightly hysterical artistic temperaments worked toward our destruction and let Diego Rivera gaily take exclusive hold of the field of painting for years, a hold he kept to the end.

It is understandable that this story is still imbued with passion. I wish to point out that I have not attempted to unduly boost my role in this glorious epic but only to recount the events as they succeeded each other for me. There may be other truths, but this is the truth which I lived.

Mexico, August 1946 *Fernando Leal*

CHAPTER 14

Reminiscences: Ramón Alva de la Canal

I asked Ramón Alva de la Canal to tell in his own words of his experiences while painting his first mural, "The Planting of the Cross in the New World." The following is a translation of the original manuscript in Spanish. I consider it as a true proof of his friendship, because although Ramón has painted other spectacular murals since then, he has consistently shunned the fame that is his due (Fig. 27a).

It was Revueltas, the painter Revueltas, my great friend, who gave me the news and invited me to go to the Preparatoria School to choose the walls that we were going to decorate.

I remember with what enthusiasm we appropriated the biggest walls still available; for when we came, Charlot, Leal, and Cahero had already selected theirs.

We signed a contract with lawyer Lombardo Toledano, who was then director of the Preparatoria School, for a sum of four hundred pesos and a time margin of two years within which to conclude the future decoration.

Having received an advance, we hurriedly spent the whole amount buying planks for our scaffolds, water colors, rolls of Manila paper, rulers, T-squares, brushes, colors, and many other things that were to prove useless in the end.

Diego suggested that we paint in fresco—a process of which we were ignorant, and though we asked questions about it from all comers, no one could give us a satisfactory answer.

Leal and Charlot, Revueltas and I decided that we would use fresco to realize our projects, but some turned later to encaustic painting, the technique that Diego was using at the time.

Revueltas and I each bought a ton of lime and a truckful of sand, when a barrelful of both would have been sufficient, had we only known. We supervised the building of some big wooden mixing troughs according to specifications given by Palomino in his treatise on painting, a work that I had discovered while searching the library of the School of Fine Arts. Following the ancient formula to the letter, we slaked the lime, discarding the chunks that had not yet become pulverized. We sifted the remainder through a fine wire mesh and put it to rot under water in our mixing troughs. Each day we carefully stirred the paste and used a container to skim off the thin crust that formed on top. Palomino advises this procedure, and we followed his formula.

Meanwhile we struggled with our projects. It would have made our work easier if a theme had been suggested from the start. We finally hit upon subjects related to the Conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards, mine being the implantation of the Cross over the primitive Aztec religion (Fig. 27b).

As the lime was maturing, we got the first tests of the fresco method under way. I bought a small mason's trowel and a large one of the type used by plasterers, and started troweling over small chunks of wall. I remember how Diego Rivera gave us a first lesson in how to apply mortar. With great seriousness he took a fistful of the mortar that I had mixed, patted it into a tortilla, and flattened it over one of the walls. Then he proceeded to paint on it a small head with colors borrowed from Revueltas' box of water colors.

For reasons of common sense, I realized how impractical it would prove to prepare a surface in excess of seventy square meters using the palm of the hand as the only tool, and I chose rather to follow the instructions given by Palomino. For the mortar of the inner layer, I mixed one part of lime with two of sand, and made the surface coat with two parts of lime to one of sand. Even though Palomino mentions the use of marble powder, we did not consider using it at the time.

In one of these tests I painted a head on the dado of the same wall that I was going to decorate. I remember how I had been painting all day long without even stopping for meals. It may by then have

been six or seven in the evening, and I was surrounded by the students of the Preparatoria, who watched the progress of the work, some jeering and others with some slight show of interest. Suddenly I felt a missile shoot through space, and with admirable marksmanship an egg flattened itself all over my day's work. I shouted insults at the students, and angrily remonstrated with the subdirector, but, alas, I could not point to the culprit and the status quo remained undisturbed.

More tests followed and the project progressed. There were great difficulties about perspective, which neither Revueltas nor I knew how to solve. In our quandary we approached Diego, who gave us such a complicated explanation that it left us more puzzled than before. To work out a solution we papered our walls with Manila paper and began drawing our projects directly on it. We passed most nights at our work, to escape the noise that the students made and to feel more at peace.

Meanwhile, Jean Charlot began to paint his wall in fresco. If the technique had interested me from the start, it now filled me with enthusiasm, as I looked at the deep velvety blacks of Charlot's painting.

In the experiments that I worked out I began to use the *bianco di San Giovanni,* producing it according to the indications furnished by Palomino. I would put lime in a container, stir it, and wait for it to settle, then decant the lime milk into another vessel, leave it to settle again, decanting again the now clear water. What remained I left to dry, the result being a loaf from which I took what amount of pigment was needed, used either pure or mixed with other colors. The resulting hues proved to be truly beautiful in quality and texture.

At this juncture Revueltas chose to paint in encaustic, because the technique of fresco seemed to him overlaborious.

By then, Jean Charlot had finished his fresco, Leal and Cahero had begun to paint in encaustic, and both Revueltas and I had been reproached by the Treasury and given a peremptory deadline of one month in which to complete our work. We alleged in vain that the terms of the contract gave us a margin of two years to finish. The

astonishing answer was that, since the Government was still under age, its word was not legally binding.

This may have been no more than an illustration of the distrust, ignorance, and capriciousness of higher-ups, but a few days before, I had met the painter Roberto Montenegro in the street and he had warned me: "Watch your step—they are going to gang up on you." The inference was that some of us were jealous or fearful that others would come ahead in their work, and that our very comrades pulled political strings. I confess that, engrossed as I was in the problems and the thousand difficulties to be met while solving the riddle of an unknown technique, I had paid no attention whatsoever to my colleagues. The incident filled me with such anger and sorrow that I became sick. In this state I went to work, and in just a month completed the wall.

I had first painted with opaque whites, according to plan and at leisure, destroying and repainting what failed to satisfy me. After the political incident, I lacked both the calm and sufficient time to paint as I meant to, and laid on the color in washes, reserving the white of the wall to lighten the tints.

As an added annoyance, there was an error in my drawings for the project, resulting in an excess margin half a meter wide that showed up once the drawings were enlarged to full scale. What could I do? With my time allowance ebbing, with my nerves shot to pieces and no respite, I began to paint and compose directly on the wall, disregarding my first project and painting figures as I imagined them while I stood in front of the wall.

I remember how Diego would come every afternoon to watch me paint, at the time immediately preceding his decoration of the Ministry of Education.

When I was engaged in the last stage of the work, Orozco approached me, asking questions that concerned the technical steps I had taken. I told him about the uses of the *bianco di San Giovanni*—how it gave opaque effects, and how I would have used it to the end if time had not failed me.

So it was, and in such a tragic manner did I paint my first wall.

Ramón Alva de la Canal

CHAPTER 15

Reminiscences: Jean Charlot

Pavillon de Marsan. Exposition Saint Jean.
Charlot (Louis Henri Jean).
31 bis Avenue Alphand. Saint Mandé (Seine).
102—Two friezes at the scale of 1/10th for the decoration of a church.
103—Way of the Cross. 14 stations and a frontispiece. Wood engraving.
104—Three designs for liturgical textiles.[1]

Such was my contribution to the exhibition of liturgical arts held at the Louvre in 1920, including my first serious attempt at mural painting. Of No. 102, a water color, a reviewer commented optimistically: "This artist deserves to be known as a fresco painter, a genre to which he tends to consecrate a growing part of his activities."[2] However, the projected murals were not allowed to mature. Though they were done with the approval of the curé in charge, the worthy man changed his mind sometime between lending the blueprints of his church and the completion of the scale drawings. He refused to even look at the sketches. This first heartbreak at the realization that a born mural painter is helpless without a wall was not to be the last. The experience was instrumental, however, in inducing me to leave postwar France for Mexico.

My great-grandfather had done just that a century before. As a result, my grandfather, Louis Goupil, was born in Mexico City of a mother of Aztec stock. Louis, too, married there, and felt so merged with his wife's country that when the French military intervention came, it proved to be no more than an awkward interlude.

Grandfather was a *charro* of note, a fine rider and able *coleador*, who

1. Catalogue of the show.
2. C. de Cordis, "L'Art religieux de Jean Charlot," *La Revue Moderne*, April 1921.

could hold a running bull by passing its tail between his knee and the saddle of his galloping horse. The second half of his long span he lived in Paris, still proud of his theatrically embossed riding costume. When academician Jean-Paul Laurens painted a historical theme, "The Last Moments of Emperor Maximilian," for the Paris Salon, grandfather lent him for a model this splendid charro suit which, in the finished picture, clothes the Mexican officer in charge of the firing squad.

In his old age Louis' thoughts wandered back to the Mexico that he loved so well. Playfully, he would lasso my sister and me on the run and, when angry, switch from sedate French to thunderous Mexican oaths. His Paris apartment was crammed with mementos: two landscapes by Velasco, featuring the volcanos; a squadron of Mexican dressed fleas; an army of wax figures, rehearsing the same simple plots that delighted me as a child and later recurred in my paintings: *tlachiqueros* sucking the sap out of magueys, *petate* weavers, trotting burden-bearers, and the distaff activities of the Mexican kitchen, females kneading dough, patting tortillas, fanning coal fires.

Uncle Eugène Goupil voraciously accumulated pre-Hispanic antiquities, even owned some of the source material collected in the eighteenth century by Cavaliere Boturini Benaducci. His idols, his books, privately-printed facsimiles of codices, and *catalogues raisonnés*, accustomed my young eye to the squatty angularity of Aztec beauty. When thirteen years old, although under age, I convinced an astonished bearded bureaucrat to allow me to enter the department of manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale, so that I might hold in my hands and absorb and copy the codices that Uncle Eugène had donated to the nation.

Desiré Charnay, the pioneer archaeologist, was a good friend and neighbor of grandfather, quite blind by then, but still a superb spinner of yarns. He would re-enact for me his jungle adventures, allow me to leaf through portfolios of his own yellowed collodion photographs that had been the first to give the world a truly objective account of fabulous ruins—Mitla, Uxmal, Palenque, Piedras Negras. Once, in a tomb laid on the slope of Popocatépetl, Charnay

uncovered a child's mummy laid between toys—a coyote-shaped whistle and a clay dog set on wheels. He illustrated the find in his *Ancient Cities of the New World,*[3] only to be laughed at by a new generation of savants: Was it not a known fact that pre-Hispanic cultures did not possess the wheel? Would the old man please retract what he had said. Charnay stuck to the truth and died in romantic disrepute. Thirty years after, similar finds vindicated his.

On the occasion of my first communion he gave me a coyote clay whistle, and I loved to blow its single soothing melancholy note, until a too-realistic description of the state in which Charnay had found its tiny Indian owner made my parents bid me desist.

As a schoolboy on my way from the Chaussée d'Antin to the Lycée Condorcet, I loitered outside the many art galleries on rue de la Boëtie, drinking in their window displays. As an adolescent I dutifully copied in charcoal the plaster casts strewn in the corridors of the École des Beaux-Arts with a full-scale replica of Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" for a backdrop. In the Louvre I dreamt long and deep before the battle piece of Uccello, tucked away by curators—who far preferred Carlo Dolci—in the small room where Italian primitives were sidetracked.

Scarcely older, by then a khaki-clad junior officer in the Colonial Corps, I rode with my battery of 75s into defeated Germany on Christmas Day, 1918. On the year-long cavalcade along the Rhine that followed, I discovered for myself the two magnetic poles of Germanic art—Cologne primitives asserting their fat forms in chubby pinks and blues against the macabre splendor of Mathias Grünewald.

Father died during the war and my sister married just after. Postwar France seemed barren after my mural fiasco. I knew Mexico through grandfather's eyes, and also knew that uncles and cousins, whom Mother loved dearly, were living there.

The "Flandres" brought us—Mother and me—to a refueling stop at Puerto México, Oaxaca, the disused head port for the cross-continent railway made obsolete by the opening of the Panama Canal. Tropical Mexico, Tehuana girls with natural flowers braided in their

3. London, Chapman and Hall, 1887.

hair, houses on stilts with black hogs wallowing underneath, and sailors' streets with varicolored women and calicoed brass beds displayed in cells open to the sidewalk made a stronger impact than the final official landing at Vera Cruz on January 23, 1921.

Ramos Martínez, director of the San Carlos Academy, received me most courteously and allowed me to paint at the open-air school of Coyoacán. There, I shared the studio of Fernando Leal, with its arched bay window disclosing splendid foliage. But cubism had already spoiled for me the beautiful landscape. It was the sculptor Nacho Asúnsolo who presented me to Rivera. The painter was happy to speak French and to talk of what we both had left behind us in Paris.

I was soon working for Rivera on "Creation." A month after starting work in the auditorium, I began my own mural. In Paris I had fallen in love with the texture, transparency, and lack of *cuisine* of the portable frescoes of Marcel Lenoir, a muralist minus a building to decorate, who had turned mason to build small brick walls on which to indulge his mural craving. I decided from the start to paint my wall in true fresco. I borrowed from Diego the French treatise of Paul Baudouin, founder of the Fontainebleau fresco school, and at the same time cultivated and probed the ways of Mexican masons and Mexican mortars, an easy feat in the Preparatoria building, where a wing was still in the process of construction. While helping Rivera in the auditorium, I used what spare time there was to work on my project.

Diary entries:

"April 19, 1922: See wall for decoration." This wall was on the top flight of the main staircase. I chose it for its diagonal thrust at variance with the routine rectangular shape of an easel picture.

"May 6: Geometric design for wall." It showed affinity with the dynamic brand of cubism—of the cog and piston type—that I had practiced in France.

"May 9: Project drawn."

"May 20: Sign contract with Toledano." Material and scaffold were paid by the school. I was to receive four-hundred pesos for my work.

"May 21: Went to see mural at Epazoyucan. Painted in distemper in black and white, with blue and red added in encaustic." Right or wrong in my quick estimate of the Epazoyucan medium, my admiration for that work suggested the use of a mixed technique for my own, a true fresco in earth colors, with pure vermilion accents added in encaustic.

"June 13: Scaffold ready."

"July 22: A student gangs up with four others to give me a beating." They resented the fact that my scaffold blocked the shortest way downstairs.

"September 14: Wall ready." Meaning that the scratch coat of rough texture was laid, on which a final smooth coat is laid in sections as painting proceeds.

"September 18: Finish tracing for wall." A geometric diagram to a scale of 1/10th that could be enlarged to wall size with ruler and compass, it bypassed the routine task of squaring. It was this web of ruled lines and segments of circles with numerical jottings that I submitted to Secretary Vasconcelos for approval. He took the diagram in his hands upside down, and so holding it, penned his O.K. with bold optimism.

"September 19: Begin tracing on wall." Enlarging this diagram full-scale on the scratch coat of rough mortar.

Now all was in readiness to begin painting. Two diary entries date the beginning and the end of the painting proper.

"October 2, 1922: Start fresco!" A day of anguish. This first batch of dark gray mortar looked to my naïve eyes as if it would never lighten. Lacking precedent, I painted blind, hoping for the best. I started that same evening to keep a diagram of the day-by-day progress, successive areas fitting into each other like a giant jig-saw puzzle.

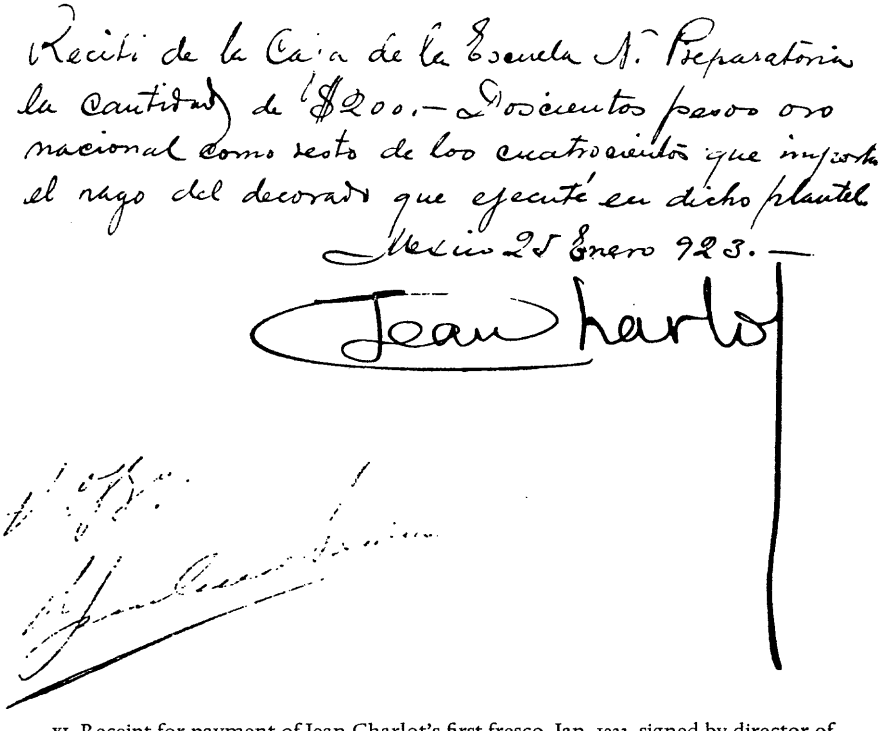
"November 25: Paint inscription at left." A logical footnote to a sound technical job and at the time an obvious truth, it read: "This fresco is the first to be done in Mexico since Colonial times. Painted by Jean Charlot and plastered by master mason Luis Escobar." This signature was the last daily task of the fresco proper that took thirty-seven workdays to complete (Figs. 28a, 28b).

There remained the coloring of the lances with vermilion. This pigment, which is sulphide of mercury, is too heavy for true fresco and was applied in encaustic. It could not be done until the wall was thoroughly dry.

"January 31: Fresco finished. Pulled down scaffolds."

"February 1: Fresco inaugurated. Many friends, pop and cookies." Such feasting was due to Siqueiros' initiative (Fig. 28c).

> Received from the treasurer of the National Preparatoria School the sum of two hundred pesos ($200.00) national gold, as the balance of the $400.00 agreed upon as payment for the decoration that I executed in said establishment.
>
> Mexico, January 25, 1923
> Jean Charlot
>
> Vouched for: Vicente Lombardo Toledano. [Text fig. XI]



XI. Receipt for payment of Jean Charlot's first fresco, Jan. 1923, signed by director of Preparatoria School.

Vasconcelos came the next day and gave his verbal approval, finding the work "quite strong."

A memorandum written at the time details the technical procedure followed for the Preparatoria fresco:

> Wall. Stripped down to its layer of stones, mostly *tezontle.*
>
> Scratch coat. One of cement to five of sand, spattered on the wall with trowel.
>
> Final coat. One of lime to two of fine sand, cement added in the proportion of 1/4 to 1/7 of the total bulk of mortar. Thickness 1/6 of an inch. Mortar used either smooth or rough, embossed for some armor hinges, indented with a stamping tool for all-over patterns, or inlaid with metal applications...
>
> Pigments. Powder in water, painting done with soft brushes... Vermilion applied in encaustic to insure maximum intensity.
>
> Material procedure arrived at after consulting Paul Beaudouin, *La Fresque*, Paris, Librairie Centrale des Beaux-Arts, and the master mason Luis Escobar. Painting based on Cennini and my personal experience.
>
> I believe that cement should be used in all parts exposed to rubbings or destructive agents, lime alone lacking in toughness.

Needless to say, the destructive agents to which the fresco was exposed were the prying nails and probing sticks of the students of the Preparatoria School. They had already ganged up against the muralists, and would have even less scruples in assaulting the murals.

Besides the unraveling of technical problems, there was an aesthetic search to be made of no less importance, if my mural work was to shoot valid roots in this new soil. The man who introduced me anew to the complexities of the Mexican tradition was no artist or art critic, but a mason, Luis Escobar. Technically he did much for me, even though he never had worked in buon fresco until I hired him, and his help did not stop with matters pertaining to his craft. While I painted far into the night by the light of a raw electric bulb, my spirit was prone to wander and to whisper how such and such

hard-won effects were as dazzling as Picasso's. Next morning I would rush to an early appointment on the scaffold with Escobar and my work, only to find him somewhat long-faced: "What came upon you yesterday, Maestro; you had a headache, no?" And he would lay the day's patch of mortar somewhat carelessly, and painting would prove correspondingly difficult.

As we proceeded in horizontal layers from top to bottom, after the traditional fashion of wet fresco, Luis Escobar had less reason to sulk, and I less terror of storytelling in paint. The day that he plastered a delicate joint along the profile of a wounded Indian, he stopped and turned toward me, loaded trowel against the painted mouth open in agony: "Le estamos dando su cucharadita," "We are giving him his spoonful," he grinned.

Critic Sóstenes Ortega was the first to mention the mural on December 28, 1922:

> The French painter Charlot has decorated one of the walls in the upper corridors... With a knowledge that older painters could well envy, he has reached a distinctive elegance in his fresco, and at the same time gives his figures a truly remarkable appearance of life... An exhaustive investigation preceded the painting of the vestments and paraphernalia of Indian princes and priests, as well as that of the suits of armor of the conquistadors.[4]

"Exhaustive investigation" is an overstatement. The jewels worn by the priests were ordinary brass upholstery accessories bought in a hardware store and inlaid in the wet mortar.

Next in time came the appraisal of engineer Juan Hernández Araujo. In his history of the contemporary movement in painting he bracketed under "painters who have imported the up-to-date European trend and as a result the good tradition" the names of Rivera, Charlot, and Siqueiros. Although his opinion may have been biased, as will subsequently become apparent, he had this to say: "Jean Charlot—young painter of Mexican origin. His work in

4. "La Pintura," *El Universal Ilustrado.*

the Preparatoria fills an important role in contemporary painting."[5]

Renato Molina Enríquez expressed a less benign opinion:

THE "FRESH" FRESCO OF CHARLOT IN THE PREPARATORIA SCHOOL.

> ... As far as the great majority of Europeans are concerned, we Americans still wear loincloths and decorate our heads with varicolored plumes ... Artistic or intellectual mediocrities who come here for selfish ends affect disdain or stoop to kindness with the haughty condescension of a colonist bent on civilizing ... The immigrant acts with a nerve and importance born of his assurance that in this land of blind men, even a one-eyed man is king. He carries his work through, thoughtfully thinking ... that we will all remain in awe, as in fact we do, confronted by the fetching simplicity of his belief.
>
> This digression is perfectly suitable as a commentary on the pictorial work of Monsieur Charlot ... The subject matter displays typical European prejudices. A victorious charge of Spanish conquerors annihilates despicable American Indians who do not even attempt a defense ... One sees only bestial and degraded features, faces of idiots and morons, hands that the painter pretends in vain to picture taut with cowardly despair but that remain bland and spongy ...
>
> ... A painter is capable of evolution, may repent later of errors committed once. Sincerely we wish it for Monsieur Charlot ... and, after all, time will tell which one of us was in the right.[6]

Molina was no reactionary critic, this article notwithstanding, but on the contrary a true friend of Rivera. In his critical output, "The 'Fresh' Fresco of Charlot" is sandwiched between two articles in praise of Diego: one hails the completion of the auditorium and the other the start of the ministry frescoes.[7]

5. "El Movimiento," I, *El Demócrata*, July 11, 1923.
6. "El 'Fresco' de Charlot en la Preparatoria," April 26, 1923.
7. In *El Universal Ilustrado*, March 22, 1923, and May 31, 1923.

Carrying on from where Molina had left off, friend Rivera also wrote his piece against the fresco:

> Arriving here with Franco-German luggage, someone thought himself the Greco of Mexico, and shed here the influence of the fatidic Catholic Marcel Lenoir, thanks to friendly suggestions that oriented him toward Paolo Uccello; after that he carried out his plan of painting a Wagnerian mural. More could have been expected of him but that is enough for such a youth, and after all, Eric Satie said long ago that "Wagner stinks."[8]

Published in December 1923, this haughty bastinado came too late. A lay public in no mood for subtleties was already in the habit of keeping us bracketed as twin obnoxious modernists. For a while, Rivera's encaustic and my fresco were the only two modern murals that the people at large could see. The habit of referring to them together lingered long after other murals had been completed:

THINGS IN FASHION

Typists at work, all dolled up
A la Tutankhamen, with split skirt
Legs painted with a garland or motif
Between Egyptian and modern, just like
A fresco by Charlot or Rivera...[9]

In another "poem," the chronicler Sánchez Filmador glossed in doggerel about an earthquake, and amused his readers by reporting how modern painters and the futuristic poet Maples Arce had reacted under the shock.

8. "Dos Años," *Azulejos*, Dec. 1923. A postscript indicates that, though published in December, it was written in June or July.

9. *El Universal Ilustrado*, May 4, 1923.

"Las niñas de algunos ministerios
Escribiendo en la máquina, vestidas
A lo Tutankh-amen, con una falda
Abierta en el costado y luciendo en la pierna una guirnalda
O un nuevo decorado
Entre Egipcio y moderno, cual si fuera
Un fresco de Charlot o de Rivera..."

Who is this one that mutters aloud,
His sight already under a cloud?
It is, declaiming his own verse,
Maples. May the astral crowd
Believe he does them proud,
For we mortals thought him worse.
Most misunderstood, all three,
Away from this globe may he,
Charlot and Rivera flee.[10]

El Demócrata, stated in an editorial:

> a majority considers such paintings practical jokes in bad taste or the fruits of aesthetic aberration. Some even point to the fact that so crude a joke will force future generations to spend more on the hire of wreckers than what it costs the Nation to cover the walls of the Preparatoria with doubtful pigments "in encaustic" or "à la mode Teotihuacana" ... Sensitive spirits feel insulted ... when they consider the decorative fancies of Charlot or Rivera.[11]

10. *El Universal Ilustrado*, Jan. 17, 1924.

"¿Y aquél que habla en voz alta
Con los ojos cerrados todavía?
—Es Maples, que recita una poesía
Para ver si en los mundos siderales
Le prestan más oído,
Porque aquí, entre estos míseros mortales,
Nunca fué comprendido;
Juntos 'harán tangente' de esta esfera
El, Charlot y Rivera."

11. July 2, 1923.

CHAPTER 16

Siqueiros

> Great social commotions originate in countries gifted with passionate temperaments ... possessing great intensity of artistic feeling.... All the art works of Italy ... were created in the midst of revolutions, violence, dissention, bitterness. The Mexican people show, as regards feeling and passion, much analogy with those men, paradoxically sentimental, bloody, and idealistic, who left through life a trail of passion and crime, linked to a powerful artistic urge.[1]

This parallel between the Italian Renaissance and the Mexican Renaissance, written by Dr. Atl in 1923, is an obbligato background to the career of David Alfaro Siqueiros. To understand his value, one must strip the painter of the picturesque and noisy addenda that wrap him in a cape of Marxist romance. Tightly packed earthquakes and catastrophes are attracted to Siqueiros as lightning was to Franklin's kite. Manifestoes issue from him as ectoplasm oozes from the pores of a medium; his texts are rife with the clash of antithesis or wormy with political clichés. They are more buoyant than Marinetti's and as disturbing as Breton's.

But the whirlwind that lashes body and soul is suddenly becalmed when the artist at work perfects an apparently simple form with intense concentration, or matures a gigantic bulk with a brush purloined from a child's box of water colors. Spared from outer turmoil, the tip of his mind, intent on meditation, sanctifies with a

1. Atl, "Renacimiento artistico?" *El Universal*, July 13, 1923.

common aesthetic denominator the crisscross mesh of political disparates.

Nothing in his activities, unless it be by contrast, reminds one that he is of most conservative breed, the son of the manager of one of the many estates owned by the Amor-Escandón family. Siqueiros grew up with the Amor children. While most boys of his age walked to school, our sturdy Fauntleroy climbed in a private hansom cab—one of two that the wealthy had capriciously imported from London—and was whisked away to class with a flourish and a crack of the whip by a liveried coachman in yellow boots, waxed top hat, and cockade.

Impervious to soft living, the artist took rather after a dynamic grandfather nicknamed Seven-Blades by his terrorized and admiring familiars, and also vividly remembered by his grandson:

> A franc-tireur cavalry man, a lancer of the Indian Juárez in the civil wars of the Reform and during the French invasion, Colonel Don Antonio Alfaro Sierra was called Siete-Filos because of a horrible ill-humour, alternating between frightful attacks of rage and most active remorse. Siete-Filos hit out without pity, but afterward he gave away whatever he had, even his stallions and silver-incrusted saddles....
>
> His returns home were announced with a fervent hail of shots, as he galloped with his cow hands into the hacienda grounds, and if my brother and I were lolling outside, we would rush for protection behind a high boulder, saved from the deadly shots that whistled overhead and covered us with stone chips. Thus did Siete-Filos give vent to his joy, while furthering our apprenticeship at being his worthy descendants.
>
> Before even reading and writing, Siete-Filos taught me how to hunt and kill rabid dogs. We lived in the driest region of Mexico, perhaps of the world, in dry lowlands where a pot of fresh water is worth fifty silver centavos, and where in summer rabies decimates people and beasts. To kill, Siete-Filos and I rode far.... We left the Hacienda at slow pace, but once outside, Siete-Filos took to the spur, and we galloped like mad inside clouds

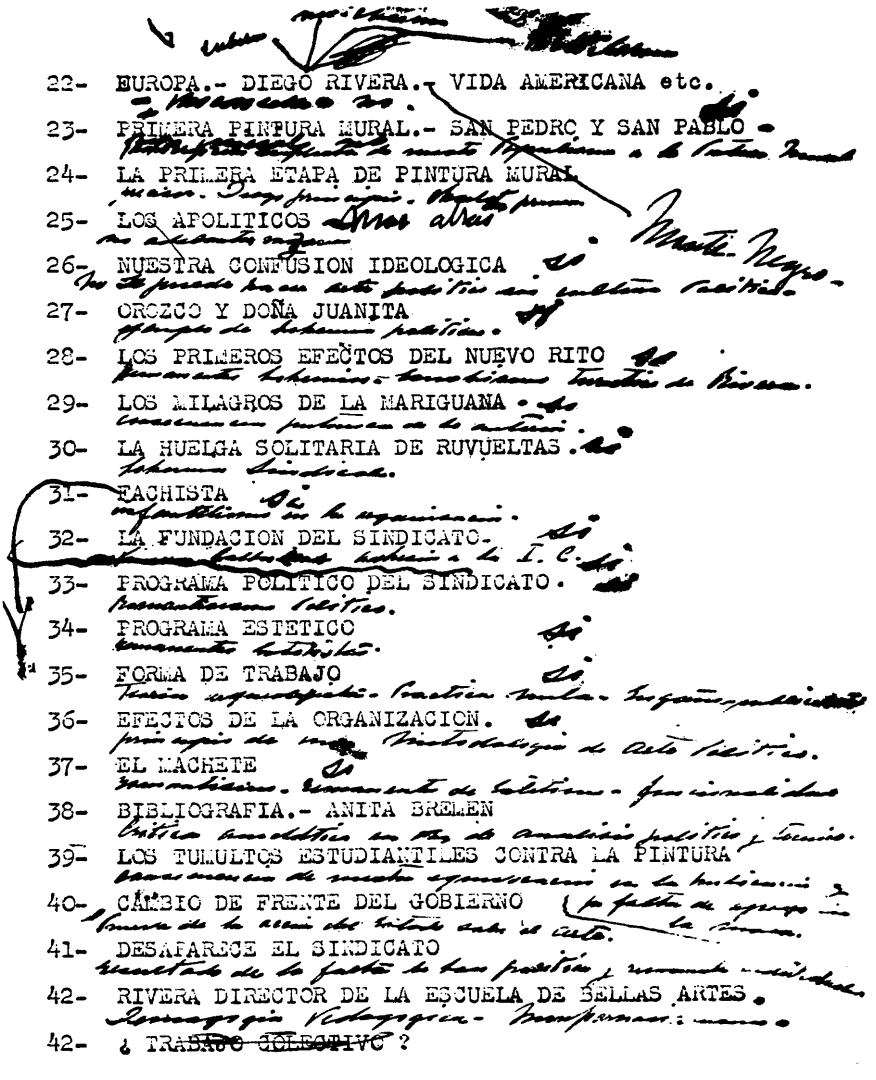
of dust as close-grained as pulverized crystal. At times the desperate side thrusts of my little horse made me take hold of the saddle horn in fright. Seeing this, grandfather bared his machete. Siete-Filos would not have cowards for his grandsons. The horse and I cringed under a ferocious hail of blows given with the flat of the weapon, and blows against the flank of the larger horse sent us forward in a mad race, followed by godless insults.... Squaws came out of their huts to give us pointers, such as: "It's a big one, the color of a bladder, eyes watery," and we galloped on. After bypassing five, or ten, or twenty farms, we were at gun range from the brute. Five to ten shots would fail to fell it, and on it went, tracing with its blood an endless trail of red. "Rabid dogs are possessed of the evil spirit; that makes them tough to die." Siete-Filos had to flank the dog with his horse at full speed, and hack it to pieces with his machete.

Then we called at the nearest settlement for the people to burn the mangled and salivating corpse (Text fig. XII).[2]

Siqueiros dates his revolutionary beginnings from the art students' strike of 1911. Then all of fourteen years old and already endowed with powerful lungs, Siqueiros was, in his own words, one of the "adolescents whose despair gave vent to violent manifestations against the entrenched academic system, truly execrable and by then a paralytic valetudinarian."[3] Today, looking at the past from the vantage point of decades of militant action, he modestly disclaims his key role in the strike: "I was still a child; all I did was join the bigger boys to see how it was done, and throw stones at things or people, hardly more."

When Martínez, waving impressionism as a torch of anarchy, lured the victorious strikers to the pleasant surroundings of Santa Anita, Siqueiros went there and was "outstanding because of his faculties, his inquietude, his rebellions."[4]

2. "Autobiografía."
3. In Araujo, "El Movimiento," IV, *El Demócrata,* Aug. 2, 1923.
4. Raziel Cabildo, "Un Nuevo Artista, Alfaro Siqueiros," *Revista de Revistas,* Oct. 1918.



XII. Manuscript page of the index of Siqueiros' memoirs. Courtesy of the artist.

Siqueiros' favorite recollections of the school suggest the priority of appetite over beauty.

> Now we had free lodgings, free pigments and canvas, but no food. The problem was pressing, and we solved it in part. We suggested to the rich girls who were our fellow students that

nothing could better one's art more efficiently than the study of still-life painting. We hinted at apples from California, oranges from Los Altos, bananas from Tabasco, sausages from Toluca.

The little ladies followed our advice, and our plan crystallized. When night came, we stealthily broke into the schoolrooms and ate some of our free and marvelous models. Then we imaginatively explained to the girls that ghosts were responsible for it. Thus did we kill two birds with one stone, our hunger and the stupid habit of copying the savory cadavers."[5]

The following exchange of letters, filed in the Archives of the Academy, dates from that period:

EMMANUEL AMOR
Despacho
3a del Factor 25
Mexico.

December 17, 1913.

Señor Alfredo Ramos Martínez, Director of the National Academy of Fine Arts.

As father of the student José David Alfaro may I intrude on your busy schedule to ask until what time the students stay in the academy or house of Santa Anita at night. My son comes home at all hours, more often after 10 P.M., and at times I know not when, and tells me that his studies so require. The question that I put to you has to do with the order that should reign in the home and the imperious concern I feel touching the behavior of my son and the care of his health, bound to be affected by the irregularity of mealtimes and sleep....

Cipriano Alfaro.

A carbon copy of Martínez' answer reads:

Your son, the young José David Alfaro, attends the class of painting from nature under my supervision, in Santa Anita.

5. "Autobiografía."

> The class is given during the proper time of the day, until the hour that daylight fails. A few students ... live on the premises as internes, but your son is not among them.[6]

The Mexican Barbizon proved much more than a technicolor escape from drab academism. A decade later, its aesthetic teachings long surpassed, Siqueiros spoke with respect of the spirit that pervaded the school. It was

> the center for a courageous group that conspired against the government of usurper Huerta. Though their aesthetic depuration was still a long way ahead, it showed the painters already free from the exotic and fatal trappings of their academic forebears. They became at once men of virile deeds, actively on the march in the penultimate phase of the Revolution. The moral depuration of their character thus appears as a forerunner of the present renaissance.[7]

Atl's call to arms of 1914 thus found Siqueiros already converted to the expediency of political action. While Carranza went off to Vera Cruz, Siqueiros followed Atl to Orizaba with other dissident artists. They named their group "La Manigua," meaning the same as the French "Maquis," the bush, and also those who take to the bush as outlaw fighters.

Siqueiros soon gave up what Bohemianism still clung to the group, when he joined General Diéguez at his northern headquarters with the combined post of staff officer to the special foe of Villa and newspaper correspondent.

At sixteen he learned soldiering, more often than not under true combat conditions. He was one of a batallion of youthful revolutionaries somewhat laughed at by toughened veterans. While the adolescents drilled and paraded, the older men would whisper, "Mamacita, mamacita," which gave the batallion its nickname of "Batallion Mama." Yet the children saw fire and gave their share of dead to the Revolution.

6. Archives of San Carlos, 1914, folder 10, "Correspondencia del Director."
7. In Araujo "El Movimiento," IV.

Raziel Cabildo wrote of Siqueiros in 1918:

> Of adventurous temperament as befits a true descendant of the Portuguese, he had just begun to paint when he left the school in 1914 to go to the Revolution. The rough and picturesque camp life, the tragic episodes of battle, the dizzy trekking through towns and country, the close communion with nature in the long enforced stops among mountains and vales, invigorated a spirit prolific in lightning-like visions and new concepts of art, and crystallized his personality.[8]

The following are anecdotes told to me by Siqueiros in 1923, concerning that period. They back the opinion he holds that things military helped in his formation as an artist, as they ring truer with regard to his mature style than do the impressionist exercises brushed at Barbizon:

> We caught a peasant whom we suspected of being a spy for Villa. He denied it. We hanged him just enough so he would suffocate, not enough so he would die. Then we slackened the rope, asked questions, and as he did not admit the alleged guilt, hanged him again. After a while it became obvious that he did not know anything about the whereabouts of Villa. My General Diéguez ordered that the man be freed and compensated with a fistful of gold pieces. The last we saw of him he was running away like mad, making drunken zigzags and scattering the gold pieces all over the landscape.
>
> We bivouacked at night in a village hastily vacated by Villa's headquarters. The staff slept in a good house. In the morning we were already seated at the breakfast table when down came a Villista officer. For some reason he had been unaware of the withdrawal of his troops and slept soundly through the whole affray. He was very good looking, with a ruddy complexion and a moustache waxed in two upright points. Still sleepy, taking it for granted that we were comrades-in-arms, he sat with us at breakfast, took a shiny new pistol out of its holster, and passed

8. "Un Nuevo Artista."

> it around saying proudly: "Look what my General Villa gave me with his own hands." We confiscated the weapon. As he understood the situation, his skin turned gray-green and his moustache suddenly drooped in Chinese fashion. We shot him outside.

With Carranza as victor, Siqueiros returned to the capital and went back to painting. In 1918 he rated his first interview in the press:

> In full youth, impetuous, intelligent, audacious, he steers without hesitation a caravel of hopes that displays on its prow, as an augury, a winged Greek Victory. Opulent colorist, master of an ample and vigorous technique, he wraps his personages in harmonies of an audacity not free from extravagance.... The dancers of Siqueiros are a whirlwind of limbs and maddened drapes, of panting flesh ... disjointed, and with incredible foreshortenings.... We end with a fervent wish that this young painter, who starts his career with such vigor, may escape being one of the many victims of our milieu. May total success crown his noble efforts and high aspirations.[9]

Of the drawings of that period, only a few are known. "El Señor del Veneno," a black Christ on a low Cross, is flanked by pious, armed-to-the-teeth Zapatistas;[10] "Sugar Skulls" contrasts the beribboned bourgeois girl with her skipping rope and the squatting Indian who sells her strange wares on the Day of the Dead;[11] "1919" ushers in, symbolically, in a war-torn landscape with a burnt cathedral and its mutilated crucifix, the first year of Europe's peace, symbolized by a naked infant driving a chariot made of flowers and dragged by butterflies.[12] Still immature in style, this *juvenilia* leans to Ruelas, Bakst, Montenegro, even Raemaker; but a personal factor intrudes. Siqueiros shows a deeper understanding of form in the round than did the draftsmen he copied.

The artist did not stay in Mexico to see the end of the Villa episode. In recognition of his political fealty through the lean years, Presi-

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. "Los Dibujos de Daniel Alfaro Siqueiros," *El Universal Ilustrado*, Nov. 15, 1918.
12. Ibid., Jan. 3, 1919.

dent Carranza shipped Captain Siqueiros to Europe via New York, a mustachioed chancellor to the Paris consulate.

Of his passage through the United States, Siqueiros recounts an anecdote that shows his dramatic flair pulsing just as hotly over things less bloody than a revolution: "Villa was cruel, but I saw worse there. In a restaurant patrons objected to the negro waiters holding plates with their bare hands, so when they served they wore long white gloves that reached to the elbow."

In Paris Siqueiros exchanged goods with Rivera. The latter helped Siqueiros make the rounds of cubist ateliers and initiated him to current "isms." In fair exchange Siqueiros made Parisian Rivera aware of the aesthetic revindications of men who, having lived through the military clashes of the civil war, meant to recast Mexican art in the new social mold. Combining their resources, the two painters outlined in conversations the manifesto to which Siqueiros gave definitive form in 1921.

On the day that Mexican newspapers headlined the surrender of Villa to Federal troops, *El Universal* also printed the following: "Yesterday news reached us that the well-known Mexican artist Alfaro Siqueiros has taken over the artistic direction of the important magazine *Vida Americana,* published in Barcelona ... His promotion to the directorship of the magazine *Vida Americana* constitutes a substantial personal triumph[13] (Text fig. XIII)."

The first and last number of this publication headlined Siqueiros' "Three Appeals of Timely Orientation to Painters and Sculptors of the New American Generation." It was of such importance that the start of the Mexican renaissance is usually dated from its appearance. It featured also a full page "Portrait of W. Kennedy" by Siqueiros (Fig. 29), illustrating some what consciously the lessons of his manifesto concerning "great primary masses: cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders, pyramids, scaffolds of all plastic architecture." This drawing shows evidence of an acquaintance with the *pittura metafisica* launched in 1917 by the Italians Carlo Carrá and Chirico, whose mannequins and algebraic equations were forerunners of surrealism.

13. "The Painter Siqueiros in Barcelona," *El Universal,* July 30, 1920.

XIII. Cover of *Vida Americana*, May 1921.

In Italy Siqueiros, having come through the narrow door of Carrá, knelt at the spatial shrine of Masaccio. The Brancacci Chapel was his personal revelation, as Ravenna was Rivera's.

His homecoming was urged by Vasconcelos, who was shrewdly casting nets for more muralists. The archives of the Ministry of Education preserve the correspondence exchanged between the Secretary and Siqueiros that speeded the latter's return. It begins with a letter from the painter, written on September 29, 1921, wherein he expresses a fear that the monthly sum of three hundred pesos

that Carranza had once granted him was soon to be withdrawn. The Secretary answered on October 22:

> José Vasconcelos greets his esteemed friend, Señor Alfaro Siqueiros, and states that it will give him much pleasure to extend the allowance during the whole coming year, so as to allow him to continue the study of painting in Europe. He also states that, if at any time Siqueiros wishes to come back, he can rest assured that there are here ways of progressing and of advancing his position, and doubtless better ones than he could hope for in these tired countries.

The good will of the Secretary notwithstanding, the successive departments of the Ministry through which his orders filtered were exceedingly slow. To speed his plea, the painter asked a common friend, the Mexican Minister to Honduras, Juan de Dios Bojórquez, to intercede:

> Tegucigalpa, November 9, 1921
>
> To Sr. José Vasconcelos, President of the National University.
>
> ... Alfaro tells me that he has a studio in Paris, and that his first exhibition will open this coming March ... Siqueiros also states that he would be very grateful to the Government for one or two more years of subsidies, and that he feels able to add luster to Mexico's name in foreign parts ... I earnestly beg you not to forsake Alfaro Siqueiros, ex-captain of the Revolution, great dreamer, and a future national glory.

At the beginning of 1922 Vasconcelos wrote Siqueiros a crucial letter, now missing from the file. In it he elaborated his theme that Europe was a tired continent, and forcefully stated his vision of a coming Mexican plastic renaissance. At least that much is implicit from the painter's reply:

> Answering yours of January 5, in which you find my plans for an exhibition untimely.
>
> Before all, I must sincerely confess that the enthusiasm that

> your letter breathes intensified my own great desire to return to my *patria,* there to share in the common work with all my strength.
>
> I find myself in total agreement with your basic idea: "To create a new civilization extracted from the very bowels of Mexico," and I firmly believe that our youth will rally to this banner ... To know Europe's actual labor is to touch the very wound of its decadence and to acquire faith in our future ...
>
> When I asked you for a prolongation of my pension for one year, I meant to study part of the time in Italy and part in Spain before coming back to Mexico, but A DESIRE TO RETURN SOONER TO MY PATRIA TO WORK THERE (a desire that I owe specifically to your intelligent initiative concerning art) led me to modify this program ... return to Mexico in May, using the remaining time to know my country better, which is what we all should begin with, and have an exhibition ready at year's end.

On April 27 Vasconcelos forwarded a thousand pesos to Siqueiros, specifically "to return to Mexico." July sixth found Siqueiros in Rome. That day he wrote to the Secretary saying that he had used the travel money to buy art materials which, in Italy, are "four times cheaper than in the rest of Europe ... You see how I am facing a grave defalcation ... I beg you most urgently to wire an order to the Paris Consul to pay me the amount due for July, and also advance me that for August, which will serve as travel expenses at the time of sailing."

Fearing a second postponement, Vasconcelos hit on a drastic scheme to detach Siqueiros from Europe. On July 10 the Secretary wrote to the Chief Accountant that monthly remittances due to Siqueiros for July and August should be paid at once, that Siqueiros' pension was to cease in Europe on the first of September, to be resumed only when the artist reached Mexico.

Promptly, then, and as planned, Siqueiros arrived in the Mexican capital. On August 31 the payment of his allowance was resumed on national soil, and to it was added another salary, for a job as nominal as those assigned to most muralists. He became on paper the

"eighth teacher of drawing and manual crafts, at 3.30 pesos daily."[14]

On arrival Siqueiros unpacked a trunkful of pictures, unstretched and rolled. Displeased with his European output seen in the Mexican light, Siqueiros repacked and locked his trunk, sparing only a

XIV. Charlot, PORTRAIT OF SIQUEIROS, conté crayon, Feb. 1924

small loosely brushed hilly landscape once praised by Picasso "because it looked like a piece of liver," its fleshy earth tree-dappled as if stained with cirrhosis.

Soon after, Ortega met him in the auditorium of the Preparatoria, just back from Europe and with eyes still hallucinated.

> In spite of his travels, Alfaro has not lost his revolutionary and martial bearing ... a firm asset for one who begins life. I heard

14. Archives of the Ministry of Education: Correspondence in folder 1-21-6-10; assignment in folder 1-28-8-32.

him tell Mérida that Spain agonizes under the weight of a tradition that produces fireworks like the pictures of Anglada Camarasa; that there is in Paris so much bad painting that encountering good painting is an event; that he returns confident of his ability to realize a work that will be both new and strong.[15] [Text fig. XIV]

Vasconcelos gave Siqueiros his choice of the walls that remained to be painted in the Preparatoria School. Diffidence, or an assurance that people would in any event beat a path to his better murals, led him to choose the small staircase of the third patio, cramped in space and badly lighted, and disdained by the five young painters who had had first choice.

The sparse light of the stairway was soon dimmed further by high wooden partitions with which Siqueiros cut himself and his work off from possible intruders. The stairs were condemned for traffic, the door of the enclosure padlocked when he was out and locked when he was in. Whatever he sought through such privacy, it was not quietness. Violently keyed voices pleaded and disputed behind that wooden Wall of China; the door opened furtively for hurried escapes, and once at least the painter himself was seen leaving with five girlish fingerprints freshly stamped in red on his cheek.

Siqueiros ushered in his Mexican period under the aegis of Masaccio. His first panel, a diagonal ceiling painted in encaustic, represented "The Spirit of the Occident," that is, European culture alighting upon Mexico. The winged female, fairly realistic and deeply modeled, hovered against a web of diagonal lines over which a scattering of seashells alternated with abstract forms (Fig. 30).

The making of the first panel took eight months. On December 29, 1922, Ortega wrote of "the work not yet begun of David Alfaro Siqueiros,"[16] and Rivera said it was finished on about July 1923.[17] Secretary Vasconcelos, who in Montenegro and Rivera had artists he could trust to cover any amount of space in a stated time, was confronted here by quite another type. Siqueiros did over and again

15. Ortega, "El Nuevo Arte Mexicano," *El Universal Ilustrado*, Sept. (?) 1922.
16. "La Pintura," *El Universal Ilustrado*.
17. "Dos Años," *Azulejos*, Dec. 1923.

the same stretch of wall, and a detail finished one evening might well be scraped down to scratch the next morning. When the Secretary made his rounds from scaffold to scaffold, he usually found the door of Siqueiros' high fence closed to his official knocking. In his memoirs he speaks bitterly of the artist of whom he had expected much, through months that he remembers as years: "For two years I was patient with Siqueiros who, during all that time, failed to finish some mysterious sea-shells in the stairway of the small patio of the Preparatoria. Meanwhile newspapers would revile me, accuse me of maintaining drones under the pretext of painting murals which never came to an end or proved sheer absurdities when they did."[18] Vasconcelos again, speaking twenty-four years after, said: "Years went by and he never did anything. His work as a painter is obviously posterior to my term of office in the Ministry."[19]

Rivera also was impatient: "There is a painter who, having been commissioned to cover an area of hundreds of square meters and having done, very well done, a tiny ceiling, feels restless and broods because all the giant loudspeakers of the radiophone of fame have not already proclaimed his great merit."[20]

Rivera stated his opinion of the work: "In the middle of a ceiling strewn with formal elements, interesting, original, strongly plastic, and emotive, Alfaro Siqueiros stamped a figure in which he made certain concessions, without, however, debasing plastic qualities. The result reminded me of a somewhat Syrio-Lebanese Michelangelo."[21] In contrast with Rivera's near rebuff, Juan Hernández Araujo bracketed Siqueiros together with Charlot and Rivera as "Painters who have imported the latest European trend and as a result the good tradition." He is "a young painter who intelligently realizes the decoration of the *Colegio chico* of the Preparatoria."[22]

Araujo—champion of Charlot and Siqueiros—gave us in his "Contemporary Movement of Painting in Mexico" the only historical art survey truly contemporaneous with the beginnings of the

18. *El Desastre.*
19. Unpublished manuscript.
20. "Dos Años."
21. "Diego de Rivera discute," *El Demócrata,* March 2, 1924.
22. "El Movimiento," I, July 11, 1923.

movement. It rather adds to the interest of the work to know that its four installments, published between July 11 and August 2, 1923, in *El Demócrata,* were a literary hoax. At the time, Siqueiros and I were living together in Colonia Roma. As our causeries lengthened, our points of view merged. Mexican art criticism seemed to us inadequate and we decided to give it a lift. To lend authority to the text, which the names of two budding modernists lacked, we hit upon the impressive nom de plume *Ingeniero* Juan Hernández Araujo. The nom de plume was also a wise move inasmuch as the engineer did not spare our friends or shy away from proclaiming our worth.

"Araujo's" estimates are colored by the classical purpose that marks mid-1923. A group within our group veered toward classicism, though no conservative outsider would have conceded the term or detected a difference between its works and what the addicts of Indianism painted. The ceiling of Siqueiros, a eulogy of Europe's culture, matched in intent the mural of Alva, "Erection of the Cross in the New World," ready in June. It also fitted in with Orozco's first frescoes, begun on July 7 in the school patio and patterned after pseudo-canons of classical beauty.

Rivera had not been consulted. Working at that date in the first court of the ministry in his brand-new Indian vein, he uneasily viewed a potential schism: "We may find that we are stuck in the thick of a diminutive quarrel, à la the nineteenth century, between classics and romantics... In this quarrel as of old, insofar as painters have their say, all want to be classical."[23]

Having unloaded in his first panel an accumulated European baggage, Siqueiros turned, in the second half of 1923, toward Mexican sources. A curious work, curiously arrived at, marks the shift of techniques that Siqueiros made from encaustic to fresco. The architectural counterpart of the "Spirit of the Occident," but steeped in Mexicanism, it is the figure swaddled in a *rebozo* that rests against the diagonal ceiling of the second flight of stairs.

Wanting to sample fresco, Siqueiros had a mason lay out, early one morning, fresh mortar over the whole panel; but the artist failed to appear that day. One of us, supposedly Guerrero, encoun-

23. "De Pintura," *La Falange,* Aug. 1, 1923.

tering the tempting white patch still untouched by evening, could not resist the call of the fast-drying mortar and painted on it throughout the night. Unaware of this, Siqueiros arrived in the morning to find the job completed to his thorough satisfaction. His one contribution is margins in encaustic that repeat abstract motifs from the earlier ceiling panel.

Painter Roberto Reyes Pérez, Siqueiros' helper at the time, told me of this and of similar occurrences:

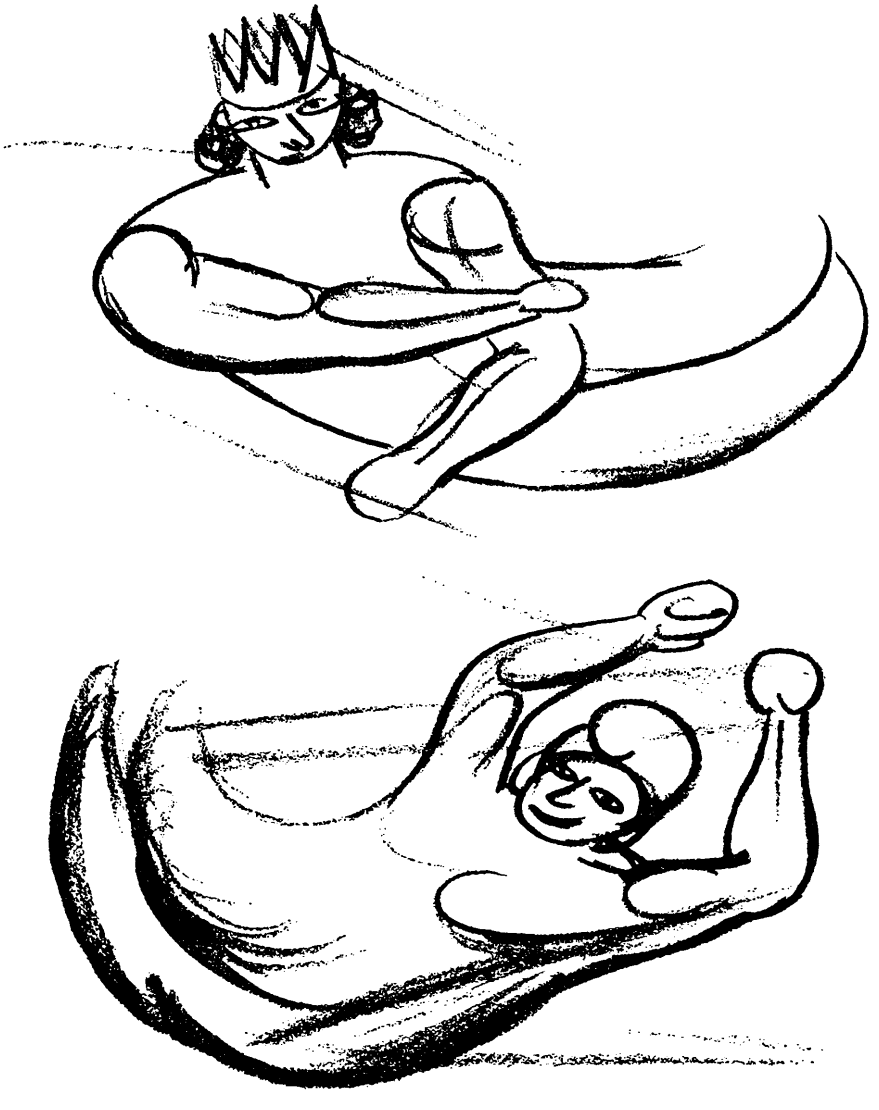
> Out of twenty *aplanados* that Siqueiros asked of the mason, eighteen would go to waste, for he was rarely on the job. I did not dare touch them myself in case he should decide to show up, but would urge more seasoned painters who happened to visit within the enclosure to try their hand at it. I helped Guerrero on the night that he painted a ceiling, and other pieces came into being in the same way. Of the woman with rebozo frescoed on the wall, one foot is by Guerrero and the other by Anaya. And I painted the hammer between the windows. To be sure, the corkscrew pattern of the upper ceiling and the perspective illusions of the lower stairs are all by one man, a house painter called Vásquez.

As one ascends the stairs—even with the murals in their present mutilated condition—one feels the strong and slow current that swept the artist back from Florence to Teotihuacán. But it is only when Siqueiros changed from encaustic to fresco in the decoration of the upper cubicle that he fully mastered his Mexican style.

His first buon fresco can be roughly dated from October 1923. It was a hovering figure of the Republic that he immediately destroyed to make place for another fresco, "Angels of Liberation," still partly in existence. Of the former, the full-scale pencil study of a head wearing the Phrygian cap remains, a motif that came to a climax of realization twenty years later in the mural of the Palace of Fine Arts (Fig. 31).

Siqueiros was working on his third fresco, "The Burial of a Worker," when the news of the shooting of Carrillo Puerto reached him in January 1924. He wrote the name of the murdered man on a

paper which he sealed in a bottle and walled in the mortar behind the painted coffin, dedicating this plebeian memorial to him who claimed descent from the Mayan king Nachi-Cocom (Fig. 32).



xva, xvb. Siqueiros, MONARCHY AND DEMOCRACY, 1947; sketches done from memory of his frescoes in the small staircase of the Preparatoria School, mutilated in 1924 and destroyed in 1926.

Between March and July Siqueiros painted, in the wall space between windows, God and Satan hovering over two supine figures, Monarchy and Democracy (Text figs. xva, xvb). It is during this time that painter Rodríguez Lozano on a visit to the staircase ventured the opinion that what Siqueiros needed was hydrotherapy.

Rivera admired Siqueiros' frescoes as much as he had felt lukewarm toward the encaustics:

> If for once one can use the adjective "magnificent" for a painting in which lineaments begin to assert themselves, it applies to what Siqueiros does today. All decorative conditions and all plastic conditions are fulfilled in what he is in the process of achieving, sprung from love and emotion of the highest quality, and to crown it all he has arrived at the most complete synthesis of our race to be realized since pre-Cortesian times.[24]

Until these paintings were done, Indianism had been synonymous with folklore or folk art. The decorations of San Pedro y San Pablo were enlarged from *bateas.* Leal painted native dancers in full regalia. Rivera frescoed a kaleidoscope of peasant lore on the walls of the Ministry. Instead of portraying a given locale or of fitting a costume to each festival, a step to each ritual dance, Siqueiros was the first to erect a naked Indian body as removed from picturesqueness as a Greek naked athlete, a figure of universal meaning within its racial universe.

24. "Diego de Rivera discute."

CHAPTER 17

Orozco: Premural Career

> José Clemente Orozco.
> Born in Zapotlán, State of Jalisco, thirty-seven years ago.
> Enrolled in 1910 at the National School of Fine Arts, entering directly the classes of life, anatomy, and perspective.
> Exhibited works in group shows in 1910 and 1922.
> One-man show in 1916.
> Contributed cartoons to a number of political periodicals.[1]

Thus in 1923 the artist tersely summed up his premural career, factually enough except that his age at that time was forty.

Orozco was a one-city man. Sights—open and secret; sounds—traffic confusions, drunken voices, whizz of bullets, nickelodeon dirges; smells—fumes from beaneries, hot rabble packed in cheap vaudevilles: all that he perceived on the sidewalks and in the interiors of Mexico City was, to this *tapatío*-born, music, poetry, and inspiration.

A true city man, Orozco despised folk art and rural occupations, over which his Paris-anointed colleagues raised their sophisticated hands in blessing. But cities too breed folk arts, and of these the artist drank deep.

At ten years old, stopping on his way to grade school, his nose would flatten against the glass window of the sidewalk studio where Posada worked, a brown fat balding man in a loose white blouse. The lad watched the swift burin carve on metal blocks those perennial best sellers, "The Man Who Eats His Own Children," "The

1. Orozco, unpublished manuscript.

Two-headed Stillborn," "Woman Gives Birth to Seven Beasts and Two Boys," "Lovers Go to Hell on Account of a Dog." An occasional picture of anti-Díaz meetings, with bricks and bats flying, taught the child early the delights of being "against it." What an incentive the bold, brusque line of Posada, all the more muscular for being dug in metal, must have been for Orozco to draw. At times the shy lad would get up enough courage to enter the workroom and stuff his pockets with the master's metal shavings.

A little further on, as he ambled from school, stood the open shop where the publisher Vanegas Arroyo sold Posada-illustrated penny sheets—wholesale to city newsboys and rural peddlers, and retail to house servants and school children. The plates, now become pictures, were hand-tinted in sight of the customers by female relatives of the publisher, with stencils and gaudy glue-pigments. A maroon *charro* lassoing an orange gun galloped away, leaving French Zouaves blushing shamefully enough to match their scarlet pants. The massacre of Chalchicomula piled pink corpses with scarlet wounds under the feet of white clad stretcherbearers, faces averted under yellow petate hats. Skies remained indecently blue. There Orozco pondered the problems of color.

His parents had mapped out a career for him as an agricultural engineer. Three years at the Escuela de Agricultura de San Jacinto, D.F., the national agricultural school of Mexico, taught him how to yoke an oxen team, plow a straight furrow, manure soils, rotate crops, and spoiled him for the art of landscape painting. He graduated in 1899, entered the Preparatoria School in 1900 to further his mathematics, but failed to persevere. In 1906 the neighboring San Carlos Academy lured him to an artistic fate. He thrived there on the stiff academic diet, zealously copied plaster casts and photographs, and trained his hand and eye to the inhuman objectivity of a camera. He worked his way through doing odd jobs in the graphic workshop of the newspaper *El Imparcial* and as draftsman to the architect Carlos Herrera.

In September 1910 Orozco contributed some cartoons and charcoal drawings to the all-Mexican show that was part of the centennial celebrations, the apotheosis and sunset of the Díaz regime. The

mention found in the official memorial album anticipates the work of the seasoned artist: "J. T. [sic.] Orozco has exhibited many caricatures and compositions. The former are typical of strong draftsmanship with lines bold and firm, supremely expressive, and full of very deep intentions. The latter are also like that. Their tormented and

XVI. Orozco, theatrical cartoon from *El Ahuizote*, ca. 1913.

convulsive attitudes bring somehow to mind Rodin's drawings."[2]

The smoothly policed world of Porfiro Díaz could hardly meet with Orozco's approval as readily as the evidences of its dry rot. He no doubt questioned the validity of the centennial festivities, where "extras" plumed and painted as sixteenth-century natives paraded

2. Genaro García, *Crónica oficial de las fiestas del primer centenario*, Mexico, 1911.

in historical pageants, while live Indians were carefully swept off the streets.

Yet when Díaz slunk off to Europe, and Madero became liberator and President amidst enthusiastic huzzahs, Orozco was still "against it." The opposition sheet, *El Ahuizote*, ran in 1911-12 an Orozco feature

XVII. Orozco, anti-Madero cartoon from *El Ahuizote*, 1913.

called "Congressional Cinema," which portrays Maderista politicians with the ferocity of young Daumier distorting King Louis-Philippe into a pear. Orozco's Madero resembles a chick-pea (Text figs. XVI, XVII).

The artist's own tempestuous climate was strong enough to permeate a whole nation. Madero's assassination, the shelling from the Citadel, and the piles of corpses burnt to a crisp in the streets that ushered in the dictatorship of Victoriano Huerta may have been for Orozco, still a student at San Carlos, the first intimation that the tragic crescendo of Mexican politics was rising at last to meet his own subjective pitch. The usurper further released the artist by keeping the town wide open. Gambling hells and assorted para-

dises, which framed his studio in ill-famed Illescas Street, inspired many a tender masterpiece through magical alchemy. But Orozco was again "against it." From his rise to power in 1913 to his flight to exile and death by poison, Huerta remained haunted by Orozco's bitter cartoons.

It was in November 1913 that Orozco was given the attention of a first interview:

A Painter of Woman

by José Juan Tablada.

> The servant announces that a visitor, whose name tells me nothing, waits at the foot of the stairs of my 'hortus conclusum.' Tall, in mourning, doubled over at the shoulders, he introduces himself loosely: "I am Orozco, the cartoonist. My visit..."
>
> "If you are an artist, come in," I interrupt, relieved, and show him to the library ... The artist talks in a muffled voice languidly... tired and without a spur, as if his visit entailed walking from a far-off place. He invites me to go and see his latest works, asks if I would write introductions recommending him as a social caricaturist. He tells me that he had drawn much from the model at the school of Fine Arts, and that now, to shake off academicism, he prefers to observe the model in movement, storing up mental impressions which he paints later. As I ask what his favorite subject matter may be, he answers that nowadays he paints exclusively women, limiting himself to college girls and prostitutes.
>
> This confidence struck me as paradoxical. How could the creator of brutal and truculent cartoons express the fragile charm and the poetry that women stand for. There was nothing in my momentary guest to suggest a continuor of the sumptuous breed of painters of *fêtes galantes* à la Watteau...
>
> I went the next morning. The studio was a small room furnished with what accessories are indispensable to working and to living, an easel, a table for colors, a bed, a washstand. On the walls and in portfolios were the water colors, pastels, and draw-

ings that are, up to now, the whole work of Orozco. As the artist said, woman is the perpetual theme of all these works...

From a large portfolio surge before my eyes the drawings concerned with schoolgirls... Young women meet and kiss endearingly ... furtive looks and affected gestures rehearse nascent perfidies, weapons are being essayed and sharpened for the coming duels of passion.

All these studies are pen and ink drawings stamped with two essentials, movement and expression. A notable mastery of the pen creates with deep black lines the heavy texture of thick hair or dark scarves, gray lines express a blond hairdo, a single outline records the vaporousness of a linen skirt.

It is with reluctance that I close the portfolio of Claudines, with a last look at childish heads made larger by the coquettish note of a wide knotted ribbon, at bodies where svelteness and plenitude express a first try at a mature form.

Hung on the walls, water colors and pastels form the second, most original, strong, and intense half of the work of Orozco. A vast gallery of prostitutes is surprised in the gestures, attitudes, and episodes of their frenetic and miserable life. Chaste reader, do not feel alarmed... No work is more pictorial, none as meritorious on the plane of pure ethics. All the traits that go with vice, hellish pallors, feverish eyes, pouches, extenuations, excesses that presage idiocy, rabid and delirious paroxysms, all are there, cruelly, brutally expressed, if one may call brutal the victorious strength with which the artist pries out the misery of dark souls ... and nails it skin deep on features decayed and rouged, pale and bloated...

No, the limning of Orozco does without camellias and perfumes, and is minus eighteenth-century falbalas. A delirious force, a blind instinct, a somber disease is seen and projected on paper through the means of color, and with it its dumb rebellions, fanatic superstitions, ephemeral tendernesses, murderous rages, prides and humiliations, deep disgusts, and ingenuous hopes.

...Orozco is one-armed, which has not stopped him from

> achieving with one limb what many quadrumanous artists would never be able to do. The public that is curious about art will soon be able to admire a show of Orozco.[3]

The promised one-man show was delayed three years by bloody events that contemporaries firmly believed deserved priority over the brushings of ink and water color on paper.

To Carranza, the victor over Huerta, the artist pledged his first and last political allegiance. In November 1914, when Zapata, Villa, and Gutiérrez smoked Carranza out of Mexico City into the State of Vera Cruz, Orozco chose to follow.

Though little given to speech making, Emiliano Zapata remarked on entering the capital: "When we southerners arose ... I solemnly swore to my soldiers that, after taking the Capital of the Republic, I would burn on the spot the presidential chair, because it is my understanding that all men sitting on this malefic chair forget instantly the promises made when they were simple revolutionaries." And he concluded with a twist that Orozco could relish even in the mouth of a foe: "Alas! I cannot make good my word, for I now learn that Don Venustiano Carranza has taken the chair with him, sticking to his presidential right to sit on it in whatever spot he may be."[4]

To give a fit setting to the purloined chair, Carranza decreed Vera Cruz the new capital of the Republic and proceeded with civic improvements. On July 22, 1915, he ordered the transformation of the notorious political jail and island fortress of San Juan de Ulúa into a regional colonial museum. Prone to compare himself with only the greatest, he must have felt akin to Napoleon reorganizing the Comédie Française from an uneasy bivouac in flaming Moscow. Pictures of mural scale were commissioned for the new museum from three political faithfuls, Francisco Romano, Míguel Angel Fernández, and Clemente Orozco. Carranza's cultural temerity in the face of adversity ended happily, for Mexico City was his again in August.

Finished prior to February 1916, the commissioned pictures are re-

3. "Un Pintor de la mujer: José Clemente Orozco," *El Mundo Ilustrado,* Nov. 9, 1913.
4. Quoted by F. Ramírez Plancarte, *La Ciudad de México durante la revolución constitucionalista,* Mexico, Botas, 1941.

produced in the *Bulletin of Education* of that date.[5] Orozco contributed the closing episode of the War of Independence, "The Last Spanish Forces on Mexican Soil Evacuate with Military Honors the Fortress of San Juan de Ulúa in 1825." Painted in grand sober style, it contains the potential future majesty of the Preparatoria frescoes (Fig. 33).

Throughout his enforced exile in Orizaba, far from cherished Illescas Street, Orozco took "a consciously virile part in the struggle." Headquarters of "La Manigua" were installed in a church that was first conscientiously sacked. Orozco slept on a military cot, protected from the night cold by a sumptuous gold-embossed liturgical cope. At meal time it was his appointed job to call people to mess by ringing church bells, facetiously chanting, "Basura, basura!" in nostalgic imitation of the garbage men whose bell and chant played early morning Pied Piper to the servant girls of Mexico City. He even crammed a *tompiate* full of sacred loot, which his pious mother hastened to return to the priests on the first night that her prodigal son spent at home.

In Orizaba Orozco brushed posters and cartoons for *La Vanguardia*, a field journal that was printed in the sacked church and distributed by its staff from troop trains that shuttled endlessly in darkness from bivouac to battlefield to hospital to bivouac.

The ditch along the tracks was filled with sleeping soldiers lying beside corpses more still than they. The carcasses of dynamited locomotives formed corrugated, twisted metal fingers as markers over human bodies none bothered to extricate. Ambushing parties crouching on horseback or afoot screened themselves against the railway slope. Men returning from battle journeyed along it, with dead comrades strapped to their horses over the saddlebags. The parade of telegraph poles silhouetted their crop of hanged bodies against each yellow dawn. At sidings, men, women, and children fell snoring, tucked between trestles, heads pillowed on the bare rail.

Civil war mangled the landscape. Maguey plants, the peacetime pulque givers, grew crooked, their sap burned from the too-rich manure of human fragments. The doors and windows of cubic

5. *Boletín de Educación*, 1 (1916), 107.

houses once daubed with pinks and pistachios, were black gashes exposing their incinerated innards.

Strange doings went on in the strange landscape. The daily rite of shootings: platoons driving men in white collars and derbies to the wall; the wives of the prosperous groveling in vain before *sarape*-wrapped and sombreroed chieftains; weary gravediggers falling asleep at their ever-renewed job. Behind the troops tramped women camp followers, weighted with kettles, baskets, babies. They halted to wipe the sweat off a straggler's forehead, nursed the wounded, tried on bourgeois hats, cooked on open fires, howled and huddled for comfort as their men fell.[6]

Orozco learned more from the treks and drills of feuding *condottieri* than he had from the fly-specked plaster casts of the academy. His eye and memory retained for future reference the strong, dark, and silent Yaquis, traditional holders of the balance of power; the Villistas, loud on the trigger; the Zapatistas, sadistic and devout, carrying, besides guns and cartridge belts, scapulars, medals, and rosaries.

Unwitting models composed tableaux such as no Hollywood could equal and no censor countenance. When Atl as leader of the so-called "World-Wide Workers' Organization" threw open the Church of the Conception to his famished hordes:

> carnivalesque sarabands of men dressed, some in surplices, some in choir copes and priest's bonnets, some in cassocks and stoles ... climbed the altar steps to ape with comical genuflections the ceremonies of the mass ... or ascended the pulpit and in mock preaching declaimed, or rather vomited, the most horrendous blasphemies.... Seated inside confessionals they exhorted with loud taunts and jeers their companions, busy with destruction, to come and reveal their sins. A few syndicalist women ... flaunted tunics wrenched from sacred images, donned sacerdotal albs, flaming crowns of shining gold and altar cloths for aprons. One, jerking the image of a Child ... from the arms of some statue mimicked obscenely, swearing with ear-splitting howls that she had just given birth![7]

6. The last three paragraphs are based on Orozco's set of wash drawings of the Revolution.
7. Quoted by Plancarte.

Although he saw all this in 1913–16, the artist did not then put it on paper. As he explained to Tablada, his method was "to observe the model in movement, storing mental impressions to be painted later." In the case of the revolution, and contrary to accepted belief, the lapse between observation and execution stretched over at least a decade.[8]

Knowing the corrective propaganda value of art at a moment when Mexico's military was becoming internationally notorious, Carranza decided, on his return to Mexico City, to assemble a group show by Mexican painters. It was to tour the United States "with the double purpose of introducing Mexican culture to foreign parts, and to open a market for the exhibitors."

Although the worthy plan failed in the end, the works collected were shown at home in May 1916. Wrote Raziel Cabildo:

> Most discussed and least appreciated of all is the cartoonist J. C. Orozco. That this artist displeases is natural, his idiosyncracies being at odds with the well-worn clichés revered by a public bred to the cult of prettiness.
>
> Orozco's art is disquieting, spectral, tortured. He is the Marquis de Sade of our painters... These are nightmarish watercolors where human monsters shake in a convulsive dance their rotted flesh, amidst an asphyxiating fog compounded of alcohol fumes, tobacco, and stale pomade, wasted faces dripping doped sweat along the fatty whiteness of cosmetics...
>
> Breaking in manly fashion with consecrated habits, the technique was bound to raise furious indignation among apterous painters and bourgeois hypocrites.[9]

Later that year, Orozco did hold his first one-man show:

Exhibition
José Clemente Orozco
September 1–20, 1916
No. 28 Avenida Francisco I. Madero
Casa Francisco Navarro. [Text fig. XVIII]

8. See Charlot, "Orozco's Stylistic Evolution," *College Art Journal*, 9, 148.
9. "La Exposición de la Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes," *Revista de Revistas*, May 7, 1916.

The street was the aristocratic San Francisco Boulevard, renamed after "chick-pea" Madero, who in death had become a national hero. Did the risqué subject matter frighten Sr. Navarro into retracting a proffered hospitality? At any rate, the locale was switched at the last moment to the Biblos Bookshop, Bolivar 22.

EXPOSICION

JOSE CLEMENTE OROZCO

DEL 1º. AL 20 DE SEPTIEMBRE DE 1916
EN LA AVE. FRANCISCO I. MADERO Núm. 28
Casa Francisco Navarro

ESTUDIOS DE MUJERES

Primera Parte

1—El terroncito de azúcar
2—Eloisa y Carmen
3—Monería
25—La cinta
26—"Mi papá no alzaba la pata"
27— Carita gatuna
28—Rarta

xviii. Single-leaf catalogue of Orozco's first one-man show, 1916.

The catalogue was a single sheet stamped with what at the time was Orozco's trade mark, a schoolgirl with hair ribbon and saucy eyes. The exhibition included one hundred and twenty-three items, divided into three sections, schoolgirls, prostitutes, cartoons (Fig. 34). The titles of the first section are fragrant with sweet-sounding women's names: "Eloise and Carmen," "Loreta," "Lucia," "Juanita,"

"Mariquita," "Amparo." Some evoke tender plots with piquant overtones: "Cutenesses," "A Little Lump of Sugar," "Curiosity," "The Pursuer," "Poor Victim," "Pretty Kitty," "Her Short Skirt Is Her Accomplice," "A Sweet Kiss," "Little Friends." The second section lists: "Dissection," "The End of the Trail," five "Nocturnes," a set of sixteen bordello scenes, "The House of Tears" (Fig. 35).

The caricatures included a biting self-cartoon, the heads of ex-dictator Huerta and of Don Nicolas de Zúñiga y Miranda, a perennial rightist candidate to the presidency, so innocuous that no revolutionary ever bothered to shoot his brains from under his high hat. Typical of Orozco's independent ways, President Carranza, now reinstated in the capital, chair and all, and basking in Wilson's recognition, was not spared.

Orozco's brother inaugurated that same day his own masterpiece, the "Monotes" restaurant, which became famous for delicious Mexican cuisine. On September 1 Orozco's friends, after having opened his exhibition, dined there. The café was named for the "murals" with which brother Clemente had enlivened its walls. The decoration of "Los Monotes" was not an unworthy match for the show:

> A very representative work of Orozco is to be found in one of the more characteristically Mexican places in Mexico City, a coffeehouse, a rendezvous for painters and literary men called Los Monotes, a phrase that has something of the meaning of "big puppets." In the evenings when the neighboring theaters close, one is sure to meet there noted painters such as Rivera, Rodríguez Lozano, Charlot, and Angel, mixing with writers of the most modern kind. Along the four walls of the hall, veiled by an atmosphere charged with tobacco smoke and stimulating odors of spicy Mexican cookery, runs a frieze in which the personages of Orozco act and dance in a frenzy of movement and expression—"Follies" girls flirting with old beaux, couples adventuring in old-fashioned hackney coaches, policemen as passive as timekeepers at prizefights, and, as a leitmotiv, the reckless and alluring girl of the city's middle or popular class

with makeup and elaborate headdress. If anyone speaks to Orozco in admiration of these paintings, he meets only a rebuff. Their creator is positive about the mediocrity of the wonderful figures—painted on cardboard, cut out and pasted on the wall—notwithstanding that the throngs go there to admire these joyous pictures of city life even more than for the foamy chocolate, the snappy tamales, and other appetizing "firecrackers" of the native kitchen.[10]

One critic wrote of the show:

> Orozco is a disillusioned youth with the soul of an oldster, of hybrid physical makeup and sarcastic face in which spectacles deaden an intense gaze... Lacking his left arm, with right hand he reflects the profound failure of a premature defeat in the bouts of love... For Orozco, the moment does not smile with the enchantment of deceit ... he divines behind each smile calculation and under the pressure of each embrace a cipher. Dead to the sentiment of love, he uses the satire of his brush only to wound, to ridicule mercenary love in its lowest aspect. Every vice is suggested in his drawings, and the faithful worshipper of Venus must pass with face averted, buffeted by the tremendous realism of his art.

The artist answered:

> I have supported patiently the flood of epithets which the public let loose upon my head on account of that hapless exhibit, but when in a widely read newspaper I am insulted in such fashion, I cannot remain quiet longer... Perhaps the technique which the gentlemanly art critic calls mediocre is not so mediocre if he feels "wounded by such tremendous realism." Perhaps his attitude is like that of the country bumpkin who springs on the stage to defend the heroine from the villain's dagger... I am made to appear a physical and moral degenerate ... I am called "a victim of premature defeat" in I don't know what bouts...

10. Tablada, "José Clemente Orozco, the Mexican Goya," *International Studio*, March 1924.

> What does the critic mean by all this? Was Francisco Goya an imbecile like Charles IV both in life and on canvas? I am far from believing myself a genius ... I am merely an observant young man presenting humbly and modestly the small fruit of my study. I have no job and no income. I live in misery. Each sheet of paper, each tube of paint, is for me a sacrifice and a sadness. Is it fair to subject me to scorn and hostility and furthermore to insult me publicly? If he wishes, the critic shall see soon a second exhibit, and find out whether or not it comes from the "soul of an old prostitute" bent on adding one grain of sand to the future monument of Mexican art.[11]

Orozco was somewhat taken aback by the dubious appreciation bestowed by his own country. He packed a grip, fitted a portfolio with water colors, and chanced a trip to the United States. A substantial part of his work was destroyed at the American customs for immorality. A bitter Orozco reached San Francisco in time to witness the declaration of war with Germany and singing crowds stringing up dummies of the Kaiser at street corners.

Orozco crossed the country to try his luck in New York, where Siqueiros, bound for Europe, visited him in 1919:

> I roomed with Clemente. He lived in extreme poverty, working in a doll factory, painting the complexions with an airbrush and the eyes and lashes by hand. It was a fierce winter with heaps of snow. A rich Mexican invited us to a meal in the Bronx. With his address written on a slip of paper, we gathered the subway fare together with difficulty. On the way we quarreled; Orozco was an admirer of Rodin while I advanced the theory that the subway was better art than any of his sculptures. Orozco called me a poor imbecile. People shied away from us, all the more because they missed the meaning of our Spanish screams. Arriving at our station, Orozco looked for the address through all his pockets but had lost it. We tried to sally out,

11. Around 1926, when Anita Brenner was writing *Idols behind Altars*, Orozco lent her his own collection of clippings concerning the 1916 show. They generally lacked provenance and date. I quote from Anita Brenner's translations.

but the extreme cold sent us back to subway warmth. After much waiting, Clemente went out anyway in a fury, and when he failed to come back after two hours, I too went out to look in vain for his frozen corpse under the heaps of snow, until dawn.

Next day there was a whistle outside my window; it was our rich friend: "What made you miss the party last night?"

"Alas, I am crying because good friend Clemente died of cold and lies unburied in the snow."

"But no, he is sitting in my car."

What had happened was that our common friend, seeing the late hour, had gone out and met Clemente—who forgot that I was still waiting in the subway. They had had a good time.[12]

Back to Mexico City went Orozco to newspaper cartooning and a feeling of frustration. While he had written in 1916, "It is unfair to insult me publicly," he now confided to Tablada, "Those people have even ceased to insult me."[13] In 1922 Tablada reluctantly considered the artist's career at an end. He wrote: "Orozco gave up his life work because he sadly realized that ... he meant nothing to a public hopelessly incapable of appreciating his gifts."[14]

When the mural movement started, idling Orozco, with cynical amusement, watched his overalled brothers wielding a socially conscious brush. His comment was: "Painting for the people? But the people make their own pictures; they need no help."[15]

When Walter Pach came to Mexico City in the summer of 1922 to lecture on modern art, Orozco showed him his water colors. The American critic recorded in print his reaction:

> The Mexican types of José Clemente Orozco are of an expression so definitive that it is tempting to believe that his art has reached full maturity. But if one looks under the surface of his output, one comes to realize that the most important work of this artist is still ahead of him in time. His drawings, his water colors possess the hard texture of a spring soil. The forms

12. "Autobiografía."
13. Tablada, "José Clemente Orozco."
14. "Mexican Painting Today," *International Studio*, Jan. 1923.
15. Unpublished manuscript.

> —physical and psychological—recorded by the painter have the preciseness of the primitive, that is of art in such a state of intensity that, when it divides and recombines its components, it still gains in richness...
>
> The Mexican artist has produced a work that is part of the great modern expression, as much in its idea of life as in its handling of the abstract properties of art.[16]

In spite of this belated dawn of recognition, the phrase "lone wolf" was commonly attached to Orozco's name during the period preceding his mural debut. Ortega wrote in November 1922 that Orozco "has realized his work in silence and alone."[17] Cosío Villegas concurred: "There are other new painters who realize works full of interest but little known to the general public. Such for example is José Clemente Orozco, especially strong in his drawings. He works in solitude and in silence."[18] Never a publicity seeker, the painter remained unappreciated for a long time. As late as July 1924 critic Salvador Novo labeled him a pupil of Rivera.[19]

Orozco was nearly bypassed by the Mexican renaissance. Perhaps because of his political affiliation with Carranza, who had been a foe of Vasconcelos, or perhaps because he was pigeonholed as a cartoonist, he was not asked at first to share in the plentiful mural commissions. It was the personal feat of poet Tablada to have forced the government to notice the painter. His job as newspaper columnist kept Tablada in the United States much of the time in order to write and mail home a weekly column: "New York by Day and by Night." A farewell party given for one of his periodical departures northward was the occasion that Tablada chose to launch Orozco on his mural career. The following is a composite news version of the fateful event:

> The representatives of our national art, poets, writers, art critics, musicians, painters gathered yesterday in the handsome Lira Park for the banquet offered by the Cultural Board of

16. "Impresiones sobre," *México Moderno*, Oct. 1922.
17. In a review of the exhibition "Acción de Arte," *El Universal Ilustrado*, Nov. 9, 1922.
18. "La Pintura en México," *El Universal*, July 19, 1923.
19. "Diego Rivera," *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 3, 1924.

> Mexico City in honor of the poet José Juan Tablada, and to bid him godspeed.... When the time for dessert came, a deep silence spread as the president of the Cultural Board rose to pay homage to Tablada. He addressed the poet as follows: "You are returning to New York to live among the physical fogs of its climate, the mental chills of a people not akin to yours. Remember that here you leave many friends, that here is warmth for your soul and brain. *Vade in pace!*"
>
> In his answer Tablada spoke of the merits of each one of the artists gathered there, mentioned at length the educational work of Vasconcelos as Secretary of Education, and ended with a beautiful, vibrant, and erudite eulogy of José Clemente Orozco, in his opinion the greatest of our Mexican painters. He concluded by formulating a petition ... that the City Council of Mexico City commission the artist to decorate a wall in the reception room of City Hall.[20]

The mayor to whom Tablada spoke muffed his chance at a truly cultural deed, but Vasconcelos was quick to take the hint and to make amends for his previous oversight. Tablada, relating the story in English for *International Studio*, modestly told it in the third person, and added the happy sequel:

> At a recent banquet given for a Mexican poet by the City Cultural Board of the capital, the chief guest eulogized Orozco, who was present, asking the City Council to have the most representative of Mexican painters of today decorate one of the walls in the City Hall. The Secretary of Education, Señor Vasconcelos ... has commissioned Orozco to paint murals in a public educational building. The artist, who for a long time has been apparently inactive because of lack of stimulus, will doubtless seize this opportunity to prove his rare talent in a great immortal work.[21]

Orozco started his first mural in the Preparatoria School on July 7, 1923.

20. *El Universal* and *Excelsior*, Feb. 25, 1923.
21. "José Clemente Orozco."

CHAPTER 18

Orozco: First Murals

When Orozco began his first mural in July 1923, his frame of mind was different from that of his fellow workers. The oldest of the group, he was a pioneer of many of their ways, and his "Rendition of San Juan de Ulúa," painted in 1915, breathes the architectural monumentality that one connects with great murals. Since then, so much had happened that his friends, and Orozco himself, had forgotten this early incursion into the "genre noble"; the artist does not even list it in his 1923 biographical note. Orozco was widely known as a lethal political cartoonist, and some friends did remember or own some of his delicate water colors, damp with pity and tenderness. It was on the strength of this work that Walter Pach pronounced him great, and that Tablada dubbed him another Goya. It was in some such similar vein that those who commissioned him to do walls expected him to paint.

But Orozco, having watched muralists at work for the last year and a half, was idle only in appearance. Cynical at first, and quick to hint that walls and especially staircases were no place to paint a picture, he reflected on the mural problem long enough to evolve a tentative solution before he had even put his brush to the wall.

Orozco lacked the training in an international plastic language that had eased the transition to walls for men like Rivera and Siqueiros. Because the current Parisian trend happened to be cubism, the returning artists found themselves comfortably equipped to do mural work. Orozco had never been to Europe, and could not validly rely on such a timely solution of his mural problems. If he borrowed from his traveled friends such cubist means as the golden

section or the harmonic proportion, it was only to polish some details of his heroic conceptions. What he possessed thoroughly, and what his colleagues lacked in turn, was long experience as a newspaper cartoonist and familiarity with the roughly hewn metal cuts of Guadalupe Posada and with the lithographs, bland in means and bloody in intent, of nineteenth-century political cartoonists. But an awed Orozco at first shied away from this, his own tradition, as much as he had from cubism. He attempted instead in his first murals to create a classical elocution to meet on equally dignified terms the impersonality of the imposing eighteenth-century walls.

As Orozco started painting in mid-1923, none knew as yet that the evolution toward a national style would lead in time to a drastically simple synthesis—a brown man swathed in white. The first nationalist enthusiasm kindled by Dr. Atl and Best Maugard for folk crafts had scarcely abated, and the mural group still relied heavily on folk art for their aesthetic and on folk ways for their subject matter. As was usually the case with his thinking process, where the creative loving assertion needed a humus of hate to grow strong, Orozco, writing at that date on murals, started with a wholesale condemnation of the solutions already attempted by his comrades:

> The essential difference between painting at its noblest and painting as a minor folk art is this: the former is rooted in universal permanent traditions from which it cannot be torn apart no matter what the pretext, the place, or the time, while folk arts have strictly local traditions that vary according to the customs, changes, agitations, and convulsions suffered by each country, each race, each nationality, each social class, even each family or tribe....
>
> That is why it is all right to apply that which is understood by "nationalism" to minor folk arts, while it is unpardonable folly to tack it on to great art, for example mural decoration. Each race can and must add its intellectual and emotional offering to the universal tradition, but can NEVER impose upon it the local and transient modes proper to the minor arts.
>
> I personally loathe to reproduce in my works the hateful and

degenerate types of the lower classes, generally deemed a picturesque subject, fit to flatter the tourist and so relieve him of his cash....

True nationalism cannot reside in this or that theatrical wardrobe, in this or that folk song of most doubtful worth, but rather in our scientific, industrial, or artistic contribution to civilization at large. For example, a painter who works within the Italian tradition of the fifteenth or sixteenth century can be more "nationalist" than some other artist tickled silly at the sight of our Mexican pots and pans, which are fit for the kitchen but not the drawing room, and even less for the library or laboratory.

Such thoughts led me to eschew once and for all the painting of Indian sandals and dirty clothes. From the bottom of my heart I do wish that those who wear them would discard such outfits and get civilized. But to glorify them would be like glorifying illiteracy, drunkenness, or the mounds of garbage that "beautify" our streets, and that I refuse to do. The Revolution is not dirt warring against soap, but the latter warring against the former.

... In my 1916 show and in all of my serious works there is not one Indian sandal and not one Mexican straw hat.[1]

The one laudatory passage in this heated statement concerns an unspecified painter "who works within the Italian tradition of the fifteenth or sixteenth century." Allowing that his opposite, the painter who is "tickled silly at the sight of our Mexican pots and pans," is a composite of Rivera and Montenegro, this other character must also have a counterpart in reality or the comparison would loose its sting. It is in fact Orozco the seasoned muralist, envisioned by Orozco himself at the very start of his first mural job.

And once that destruction is wrought, here is a constructive credo: "My one theme is Humanity; my one tendency is EMOTION TO A MAXIMUM; my means are the REAL and INTEGRAL representation of bodies, in themselves and in their interrelations."[2]

1. Unpublished manuscript.
2. Ibid.

Orozco's exultation as founder of a creed is made manifest by the use of the capital letters in which he envisioned his dream. Not a breath of folklore is to cheapen the climate of the fancied mural world that he is bent on creating, not an Indian to narrow the boundaries of its geography. The human body is to be his only subject matter, stripped of all racial tags. "Time, the present," is waved aside as just another pettiness; landscape and accessories are deleted. So severely noble is this creed as to appear incapable of human fulfillment, or rather let us say that Orozco guilelessly installed himself in Michelangelo's own pew.

The following is a first draft for the decoration of the Preparatoria, according to the tenets of this heroic act of faith:

> Decoration of the north wall of the courts respectively called "Colegio Grande" and "Pasantes" in the National Preparatoria School. General Theme: The Gifts of Nature to Man.
>
> It includes seven secondary themes as follows: 1. Decoration of the door of the hall known as "El Generalito" and of the left wing of the corridor: "VIRGINITY," physical integrity and spiritual integrity. Cool harmony, with horizontal and vertical lines predominant; tranquility, calm. Minor composition: "Adolescence."
>
> 2. Decoration of the central area: "YOUTH," allegory of the Sun and a group of schoolgirls; in very warm harmony; lines of movement; large masses very dynamic and ascendant.
>
> 3. Decoration of the main door and of the left wall panel: "GRACE." Warm harmony; feminine predominance.
>
> 4. Decoration of both sides of the corridor called "Pasillo": "BEAUTY." Warm harmony; masculine predominance.
>
> 5. Decoration of the library door: "INTELLIGENCE." Cold and deep harmony.
>
> 6. Decoration of the central area of "Pasantes": "GENIUS." Very warm harmony, lines of movement ascending and very dynamic.
>
> 7. Decoration of the right wing: "FORCE." Warm harmony. Great dynamic masses. Predominance of horizontal and vertical lines.

> The decoration has been planned within the same modules and rhythm that characterize the architecture of the building, and in such a way that complete solidarity between both will be achieved.
>
> The technique used is classical fresco. Work begun on July 7, 1923.[3]

This first draft was drastically modified as the execution of the work progressed. Only one of its many themes ever corresponded with a completed panel. This was "YOUTH," with which Orozco had launched his task. As the rest of the frescoes deviate substantially from the written description, the manuscript must antedate them all. Thus the text could not have been drafted later than July or August 1923.

Orozco did not receive permission to start two courts at once as he had planned. Instead of expanding horizontally, the work rose in practice to the two upper floors of "Colegio Grande." Detouring around the Cahero panel already painted at the entrance of the main stairway, it overflowed along the left wall and ceiling of its well, until it met the two other panels that were already there, Leal's and mine.

To reconstruct what the early decoration of the patio was like, one must forget what today is its most characteristic feature, the outstanding revolutionary themes—Trench, Strike, Rear Guard, Gravedigger. These were painted later, in 1926, to replace the earlier murals, mutilated by rioting students in 1924.

Orozco first painted the central panel of the north wall, and first of all its upper half, with a running athlete that symbolized the sun, and two naked attendants, arms shooting upward to illustrate the theme that the artist expressed in words as "very dynamic and ascendant." Behind these levitating bodies, a crisscross mesh of lines tangential to circles suggested the workings of celestial spheres.

He filled the lower half of the same panel with a group made familiar by his early water colors: gossiping schoolgirls with hair ribbons, textbooks, and come-hither eyes, unaccountably unaware of

3. Ibid.

the gigantic naked men who ran and romped overhead. The mural in this first state did deserve its title "Youth." But the stylistically split composition failed to satisfy the painter, and "Youth" soon became "Spring"; a fairylike sprite replaced the schoolgirls, her corselet adorned with floral elements, and flowers blooming at the touch of her fingertips (Fig. 36, Text fig. xxb).

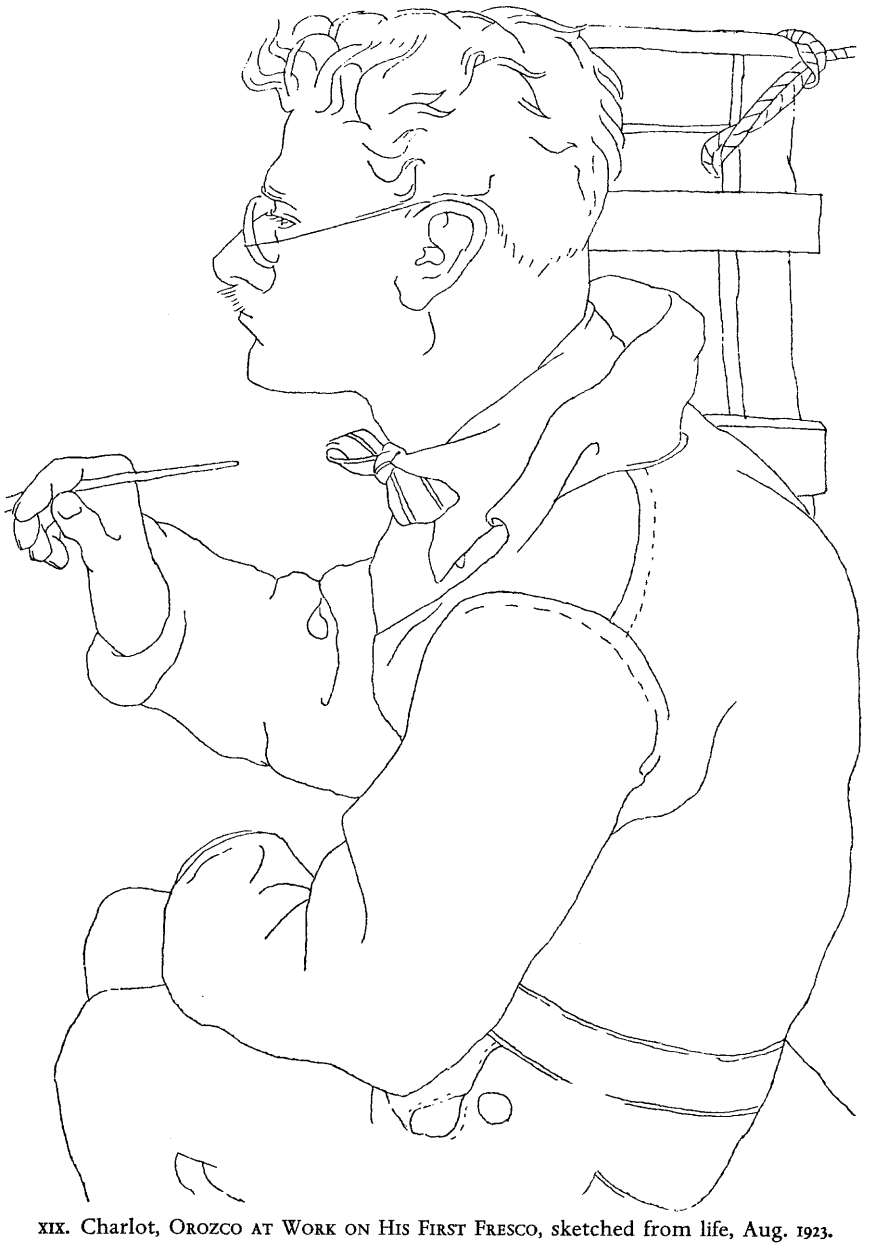
Moving his scaffold to the right, Orozco painted "Man Strangling a Gorilla." Critic Salvador Novo probably had it in mind when he described "some so-called men adorned with muscles as obvious as those of anatomical charts."[4] In its place today is "The Destruction of the Old Order."

To the left of center, "The New Redemption," a long-robed Christ, occupied the whole wall. He put the torch to an uprooted cross, lying obliquely in receding perspective. When this panel was destroyed, the head of Christ was spared and left embedded in the 1926 "Strike," still extant (Text fig. xxa).

Orozco then returned to the central panel that no longer satisfied him. Knocking down "Spring," fairy, suns, and all, he painted instead a single inverted torso, "Tzontemoc," filling the whole height of the ground floor. A striking change of mood marked the successive versions. Both represented the sun, but while the first showed a radiant athlete running in zenithal position over an Eden-like garden, the latter, borrowing from *nahuatl* mythology, depicted earth as a rocky abyss, and the moment as the fearful one when the rising evening star forces the waning globe to dive below the horizon. Orozco must have understood this theme as a parable of genius at bay, just as he did when he later painted Prometheus and Icarus, Greek counterparts of the Mexican myth.[5] Like Prometheus thieving for the godly attribute, godlike for an instant, chained and gnawed for an eternity, like Icarus flung from the ether to a crushing death below, Tzontemoc, the setting sun, falls from his zenith to the darkness of Hell's pit, there to consort with the dead (Text fig. xxd).

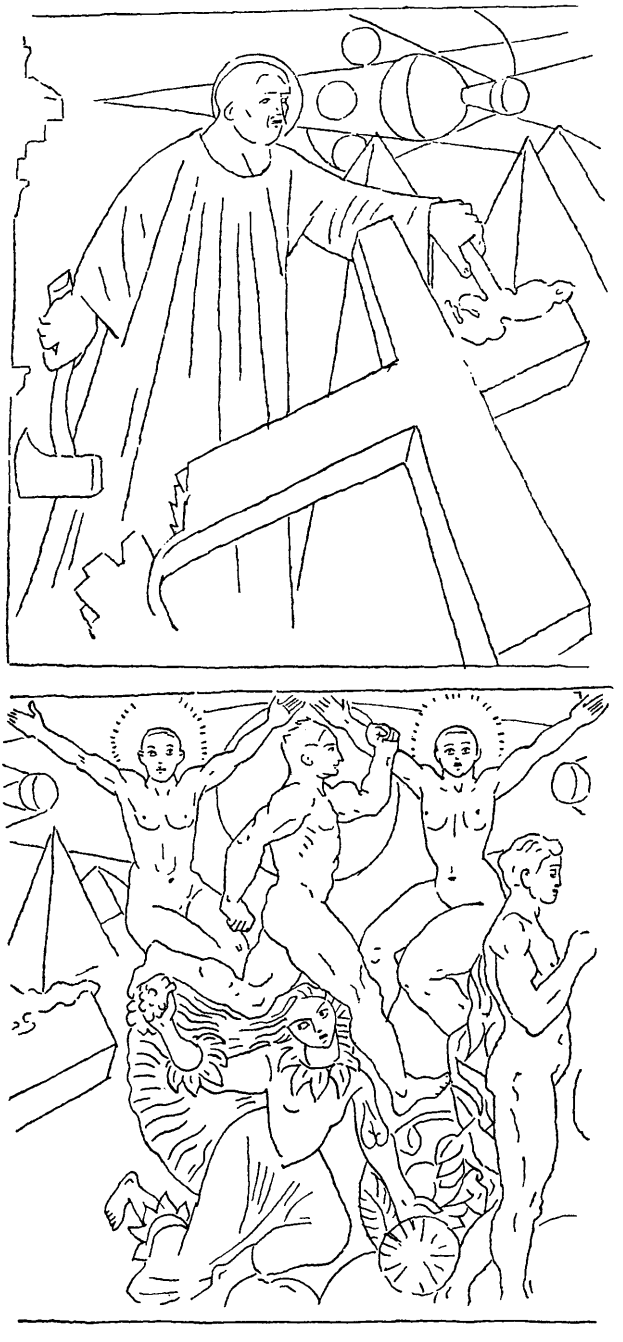
4. "Diego Rivera," *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 3, 1924.

5. The Prometheus is in Pomona, California. The Delphic Studio monograph reproduces an "Icarus, project for fresco mural, 1932," that may be a discarded idea for the same wall. A simplified Icarus falls in flames from the dome of the Cabañas Hospital in Guadalajara.

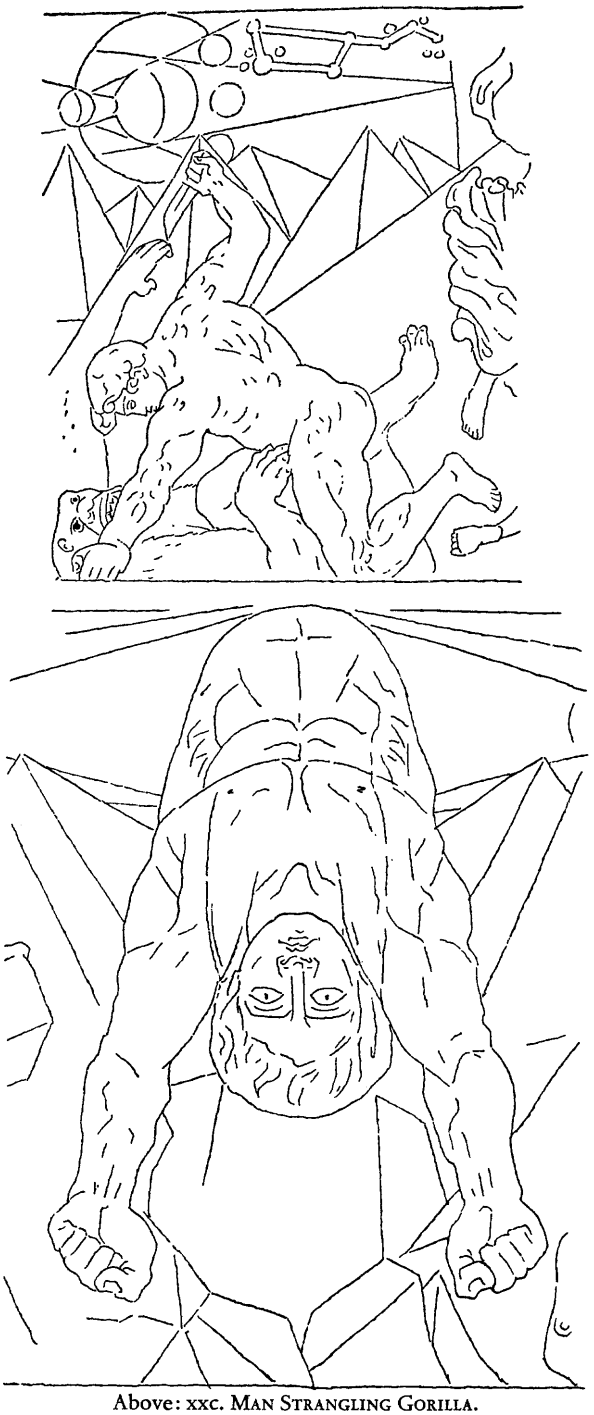


XIX. Charlot, OROZCO AT WORK ON HIS FIRST FRESCO, sketched from life, Aug. 1923.

"Youth," "Spring," and "Tzontemoc" followed one another in quick succession, to be definitely replaced in 1926 by "The Trench."



Orozco, Triptych: XXa, NEW REDEMPTION; XXb, SPRING; XXc (p. 233, top), MAN STRANGLING GORILLA. 1923.
Preparatoria School. Tracing by Jean Charlot.



Above: XXC. MAN STRANGLING GORILLA.
Below: XXD. TZONTEMOC, 1923. Preparatoria School. Tracing by Jean Charlot.

Recollections confused the destroyed panels and made them into one. Laurence Schmeckebier spoke of "Spring, a screaming figure upside down with arms outstretched, which had brought upon him [Orozco] no little mockery."[6] Whereas Schmeckebier merely said that it was mocked, McKinley Helm inferred from it that it must have been ridiculous: "He made a violent panel, ridiculously called 'Spring,' of which a huge upside down nude was the central figure."[7]

Left of the central triptych, Orozco painted "Revolutionary Trinity." A faceless, armed spirit, personifying militant democracy, inspires a young worker and an older "planner" to action. The latter verifies his blueprints with pencil and square, while the worker seizes wrench and drill (Fig. 37a, Text fig. xxia). A radical change of mood soon modified the theme to what it is now: as civil strife hovers over them, the worker bitterly exhibits the stumps of his mutilated arms, while the old man, shorn of blueprints and square, holds his hands to his head in despair (Fig. 37b, Text fig. xxib). The switch from a constructive to a destructive assertion, from optimism to pessimism, paralleled the mental revulsion that already had led Orozco to metamorphose "Spring" into "Tzontemoc."

Two end panels completed the decoration of the north wall and, to this day, remain close to their original state. At the left end, "The Rich Sup While the Workers Fight" was a return to the style of the 1916 cartoons. Novo described it in 1924: "Dwarfed and mishapen workers choke in dust, while the perennial bourgeois quaff champagne in private orgies, paired with women far from desirable."[8]

At the right end was painted "Maternity," the last of the ground floor panels, which Schmeckebier rightly linked to Botticelli. The style notwithstanding, it was above all an exacting exercise in the technique of true fresco, so thoroughly fulfilling its academic intent that, from then on, the painter was to handle the technique as freely as if he were again splashing water color on paper.

In the frescoes of the second floor, stylistically close to his biting newspaper cartoons, the classicism that was Orozco's first intent

6. *Modern Mexican Art,* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1939.
7. *Modern Mexican Painters,* New York, Harper and Bros., 1941.
8. "Diego Rivera."

was definitely discarded. On the third floor only one subject was begun: "The Siege of a Bank." Conspicuous was the floor pattern, a chessboard of black and white emphasized by an acute perspective. Bodyguards, ambushed behind executives' stuffed chairs, pointed their guns at an unseen crowd outside under whose weight the strong door was felt to buckle. Destroyed in 1926 by the artist, this panel was never completed or, to my knowledge, photographed.

In the main stairway Orozco painted three variations on the Saint Francis theme over a wall and a ceiling. Together with the "Christ Burning His Cross" they constitute impressive positive acts of faith. His preoccupation with religious concepts was not always so reverent, but even the distorted "Father God" to be found on the second floor, holding a geographic globe instead of the globe of the universe, beckoning the rich to heaven, driving the poor off to hell, would be a pointless performance in a man lacking faith. It paraphrases a certain bourgeois concept of a next world as smugly conservative as his own, when in truth it may prove to be the consummation of a revolution. "He hath exalted the humble and the rich he has sent away empty."

To assess contemporaneous reaction to the first Preparatoria decorations, as distinct from the final version, one must refer to the period prior to 1926, the year when most of the old décor was erased. Salvador Novo, writing on July 3, 1924, frankly disapproved:

> repulsive pictures, aiming to awaken in the spectator, instead of aesthetic emotions, an anarchistic fury if he is penniless, or if wealthy, to make his knees buckle with fright... It has been repeated to the point of boredom that art is not nature. Those caricatures are not nature, yet they are ridiculous. For a work of art, when it is not pretty, differs from a caricature in that it carries you upward, while the latter drags you down.[9]

Rivera's appraisal of the "classical" ground-floor panels was subdued: "It helped our great Clemente Orozco to learn the technique of fresco. As to the sample he left of this trial, it is totally foreign to the exalted spirit of the painter, and of a style that caters to the herd

9. Ibid.

of bucking jackasses that cannot reach with their hoofs the level at which the painters' scaffolds are set."[10]

However, for the caricature frescoes of the second floor and for the Saint Francis series, Rivera had no reservations:

> Today José Clemente Orozco has mastered the new technique as he did that of his admirable water colors; he has started to

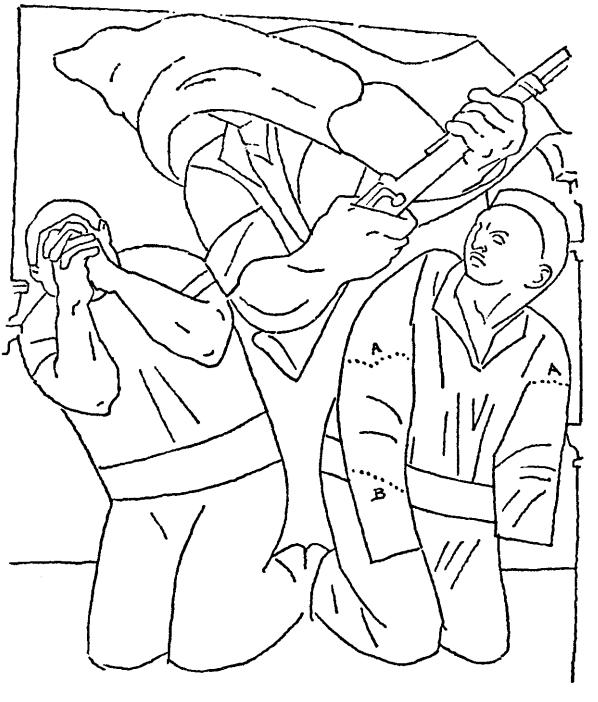
XXIa. Orozco, REVOLUTIONARY TRINITY, first version, 1923-24. Preparatoria School. Tracing by Jean Charlot.

> express himself in terms of good painting and deep emotion; such beautiful work will gradually tear down the traces of his apprenticeship, which were acclaimed by those who did not understand with bursts of rejoicing as a realization that contradicted our trend. Poor people!!! José Clemente was never born to become a painter for the bureaucrats.[11]

10. "Diego de Rivera discute," *El Demócrata*, March 2, 1924.
11. Ibid.

D. H. Lawrence saw the work and took the notes incorporated in his book *The Plumed Serpent* in March 1925:[12]

> The little party passed on to the old Jesuit convent, now used as secondary school. Here were more frescoes. But they were by another man. And they were caricatures so crude that Kate was merely repelled. They were meant to be shocking but perhaps



XXIb. Orozco, Revolutionary Trinity, second version, 1924. Preparatoria School. Tracing by Jean Charlot.

> the very deliberateness prevents them from being so shocking as they might be. But they were ugly and vulgar. Strident caricatures of the Capitalist and the Church, and the Rich Woman, and of Mammon, painted life-size and as violent as possible, round the patios of the grey old building where the young peo-

12. On March 22, 1925, *Revista de Revistas* printed Lawrence's photograph with the caption: "Coming from Oaxaca he arrived at the Capital to stay incognito a few days, on the return trip to his ranch in New Mexico..."

> ple are educated. To anyone with the spark of human balance, the things are a misdemeanour.
>
> "Oh!" said Kate in front of the caricatures, "they are too ugly. They defeat their own ends.... They are like vulgar abuse, not art at all."
>
> "Isn't that true?" said García, pointing to a hideous picture of a fat female in a tight short dress, with hips and breasts as protuberances, walking over the faces of the poor....
>
> "Who is like that," said Kate, "It bores me. One must keep a certain balance."
>
> "I know what I feel," said Kate, "And now I want a taxi, and I want to go home. I don't want to see anymore stupid, ugly pictures."[13]

That Kate is a mouthpiece for Lawrence is made plausible by his earlier disdainful attitude toward our murals. This appraisal of Orozco by Lawrence brings to mind a parallel affair between another, not altogether dissimilar, writer and another muralist: Aretino berating Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" as unworthy of a church, fit for brothel or bathhouse at best.

Orozco's paintings exude such intensity of feeling that he has been labeled an exclusively emotional painter. His own point of view on the subject differed. He did not deny the strong impact of his work, "My one tendency is Emotion to a Maximum," but sharply differentiated between the making of a picture and the function of the finished object. Already in 1916 he lashed out at a critic who had attacked his private life on the evidence of subject matter alone: "His attitude is like that of the country bumpkin who springs on the stage to defend the heroine from the villain's dagger."

In Orozco, there is no mental cleavage between the agricultural engineer, the architect's draftsman, the mathematical student, and the muralist. He wrote in 1923:

> As is the case with a cloud or a tree, the true work of art has absolutely nothing to do with morality or with immorality, with good or with evil, with knowledge or with ignorance, with

13. Pp. 56–8.

> vice or with virtue, with patriotism or with jingoism. The surging of a mountain has none of those attributes, and in the same way plastic, musical, or literary expression must surge, as does any other thing born of the impulse of natural forces and submitted to their laws. A painting should not be a commentary but the fact itself, not a reflection but the source of light, not an interpretation but the very thing to be interpreted. It should not imply any theory or anecdote, story or history, of any kind. It should not take sides on religious, political, or social happenings: It should consist of absolutely nothing but the plastic fact in its particular, concrete, and rigorously precise statement; it should provoke in the onlooker neither pity nor admiration for the objects, animals, or personages that are part of the theme. The only emotion that it may lawfully generate and transmit should be derived from the strictly plastic, geometric, coldly geometric phenomenon, engineered by a scientific technique. All those things that cannot be stated in a purely and exclusively plastic, geometric, coldly geometric language, geared to ineludible mechanical laws, summed up by an equation, are but a subterfuge to hide impotency; call it literature, politics, philosophy, what you want, but it is not painting, and when an art loses its purity and its identity, it atrophies, becomes abominable, and in the end is doomed.[14]

Such a creed seems at first to fit abstract painting better than it does Orozco's own style. Yet one must not overlook the comparison he chose to make between art and a "surging mountain." The geological upheaval, as interpreted by man, indeed blends an indifference to morality, literature, politics, and philosophy with "Emotion to a Maximum."

This callousness to the literary content of pictures came from the knowledge of painting's essential function as differentiated from its secondary ends. Interviewed in 1926 on the reason for some of his subject matter, Orozco answered somewhat impatiently:

14. Unpublished manuscript.

> What tenacity in finding an explanation or rather in asking for explanations concerning the vagaries of a painting that needs but to be attractive to the eye as music speaks to the ear, solely for its delectation. While a melody is being heard, of what use is a knowledge of its theme when the pleasure has already been savored through the ears. The painter may take his palette and empty its colors as if they were thrown in fistfuls with most haphazard results, as long as the forms thus created possess the necessary harmony to be a pleasant spectacle. Beyond this, painting may be a means, express some idea, but it must always have a life of its own, even if emptied of all other meaning. The painter's mission is to copy or invent figures according to taste.[15]

The variation in individual taste is of course the joker that qualifies this gentle general statement. Orozco's own taste delighted in the "pleasant spectacle" of "surging mountains" and other volcanic outbursts; but one finds also in this text a concordance with Poussin's own dictum, "The end of art is delectation."

Agreeing that the results of art are emotional and the making of art is mechanical in essence leaves one angle still unapproached: Why paint at all? The geological image is consistent here; as the strata of sediments are forced upward by a fiery gaseous outside agent, the painter is but a mouthpiece for some force or impulse not wholly identifiable with himself: "Art is before all GRACE. Where GRACE is not, there is no art. GRACE cannot be conjured up with so-called cubistic recipes."[16]

Orozco's visionary gift was far ahead of his manual scope when in 1923 he wrote his plan for the decoration of the Preparatoria. As we have seen, the written draft remained mostly ineffectual in practice. It was only two years later, in the House of Tiles, that his original ideal became truly operative. Here we see at last in splendid nakedness three of the bodies he had first visualized in 1923: Grace, with commanding gesture, orders both Force and Intelligence, while her upturned face receives in turn the upper light.

15. Quoted by Bueno, "El Arte de Diego Rivera," *El Imparcial*, Nov. 22, 1926.
16. Unpublished manuscript.

CHAPTER 19

The Syndicate

The creation of the painters' syndicate was but one among many similar incidents that swelled into a trend of the 1920s. In a Mexico still raw from gushes of the social hurricane, labor and peasant organizations mushroomed as the underdog got its turn. Intellectuals organized as well, some as the result of sincere belief, others in an attempt at protective coloration. So topical was the theme of collective unions of artists that *Excelsior* ran an editorial called "The herd instinct in art," about "a Syndicate of Authors that has just perpetrated its first Bolshevist venture."[1] There was also a "Union of Writers," itself part of a "Confederation of Mental Producers."

However, the painters' syndicate claimed deeper roots. Under Díaz, painters' guilds were not only craft societies but instruments of labor opposition to the long, long reign. Xavier Guerrero, who was to be one of the steadiest members of the new association, remembered that: "Father was a free thinker. He organized house painters in what was then called a union. When I was a little boy, he would take me by the hand and we followed the banner of the union in street demonstrations. It was a beautiful banner, hand-painted by one of us."

When director of the Academy in 1914, Dr. Atl promoted a society of Mexican artists, needless to say along the lines of his dynamic politics. When Captain Siqueiros, just back from the battle fronts, met in 1919 with other artists in uniform, they opened in Guadalajara a "Congress of artists-soldiers," already converted to social endeavors by military selflessness and collective discipline.

1. "El Rebañismo en el arte," *Excelsior*, Nov. 14, 1922. The Syndicate replied on November 16

Those fumblings, those augural signs, matured to realization as soon as painters reached walls. Mural painting breeds egocentric pride less than any other form of the fine arts. Only the bad muralist may remain immune to the objective pull of an architecture, to the social responsibilities involved in speaking with paint on public walls. Working elbow to elbow with masons stresses the fact that art also is a manual exertion, that wall painting and house painting are twins. In Mexico scaffolds and coveralls proved more than a badge—they oozed a functional urge toward some form of collective organization.

The Syndicate was created between September 1922, date of Siqueiros' return, and December, when Ortega wrote in *El Universal Ilustrado:* "Worthy of mention is the creation of the Syndicate of Mexican Painters and Sculptors, of which Diego Rivera is president [sic.] and which includes the strongest among Mexican artists."[2]

Siqueiros described the initial meetings:

> We gathered at the home of comrades Diego Rivera and Guadalupe Marín, who was then his wife. In this first constitutive meeting Diego Rivera maintained that we could not be considered intellectuals, that we were simply manual workers, at most technical workers, and that we should defend our daily pay in particular and the interests of our trade in general.
>
> Then we discussed what name our group should receive, agreeing on "Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers of Mexico."
>
> An executive committee was constituted that same day. I was named General Secretary, Rivera Secretary of the Interior, Fernando Leal Secretary of the Exterior, and Xavier Guerrero Treasurer.
>
> José Clemente Orozco refused to attend the session because of personal enmity with Rivera, but agreed to take up active membership....
>
> The resolutions of the Syndicate were never published, they were never even filed, given our inexperience, but in my father's

2. "La Pintura," *El Universal Ilustrado,* Dec. 28, 1922.

house I found among papers unearthed in 1934 the first drafts on which the resolutions were based, written in my own hand, with autograph corrections by Rivera, Guerrero, and unidentified others. Those corrected first drafts are quite close to the final approved text:

"The Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers of Mexico considers that, in the present epoch of exasperated class struggle, of imperialism oppressing our people, our native races and peasants, there exists, for intellectual producers and for workers in the painting craft conscious of the historical moment, no other way but to affiliate with each other in a manner disciplined by the struggles of the revolutionary proletariat. Their contributions to the movement are to be works of revolutionary art....

"The Syndicate advances the belief that art is not only a reflection of ambient social conditions, but also an expression of the geographical limits within which it is created. It should take into account the Amerindian traditions that are the exteriorization of the geography and ethnography wherein we Mexicans have been brought up and live.

"Given the exigencies of world conditions, the Syndicate recommends also that native values be connected intimately with international currents of modern art....

"In concrete terms the Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers of Mexico means to do work useful to Mexico's popular classes in their struggle, meanwhile producing an art aesthetically and technically great. To blend these two values is the essence of its doctrine.

"The Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers of Mexico is in favor of collective work. It desires to destroy all egocentrism, replacing it by disciplined group work, the great collective workshops of ancient times to serve as models. The Syndicate is in favor of apprenticeship of the painting craft while a work is in the making.

"To practice these postulates, the Syndicate will create a cooperative to be called Cooperative Tresguerras. The coopera-

> tive will see to it that all members of the Syndicate have work, and will administer it financially. It will also elaborate a communal plan for the application of the principle of work in common."[3]

The Syndicate followed its chartered course faithfully. It failed only on one point: unlike other labor unions, it lacked the threat of strike, the main labor weapon to raise salaries and secure jobs. The one-man market for our mural wares was José Vasconcelos, and the Secretary was not impressed. In his memoirs he describes the first delegation sent to apprise him of the Syndicate's existence, overalled youngsters shyly wiping their feet before stepping on the ministerial carpet, an embarrassed Siqueiros stuttering his message as mouthpiece for the group. Vasconcelos mistook the communal gesture for a sign of individual weakness, and never deviated from his habit of contracting individual painters exclusively.

The main public manifestations of the Syndicate, outside of mural painting, were the manifestoes that stand today as trustworthy, if garrulous, witnesses of this story. In June 1923 a first fluttering rash of pamphlets defended both Vasconcelos and Rivera from rumors of money squandering, which were spread in order to stop the fresco work just begun at the ministry.[4] In December of that year the Syndicate sided in print with the Federal forces against the armed insurrection of Adolfo de la Huerta, abetted by Generals Sánchez and Estrada.[5]

This martial ardor was more than a figure of speech. Members of the Syndicate made ready to join the Obregón army, and because of somewhat primitive habits contracted in early revolutionary days, they thought that they should also buy weapons out of their own pockets. Xavier Guerrero nosed out a splendid bargain, and the Syndicate became the owner of a pile of short arms, guns, and pistols. It was only when the contents of its armory were shown to a firearms expert that a question was raised—would they prove lethal for the target or for the man who pulled the trigger?

3. "Autobiografía."
4. Released on June 22, 1923.
5. Released on Dec. 9. Quoted by Anita Brenner and Laurence Schmeckebier.

The Syndicate again acted collectively when the murals of Siqueiros and Orozco were mutilated by Preparatoria students. In July 1924 alone, it drew up and distributed four pamphlets in the cause of the painters.[6] Its last collective public protest occurred in September of that year, when some of Rivera's frescoes in the Ministry staircase were defaced.[7]

An important by-product of the Syndicate was its graphic organ, a newspaper that carried more illustrations than news. This was the wrathful *Machete,* named after the curved blade, half hunting knife and half scythe, that the Mexican peasant knows how to use both in war and in peace. Its slogan, memorized by many in faith or in fear, read:

> The machete is used to reap cane,
> To clear a path through an underbrush,
> To kill snakes, end strife,
> And humble the pride of the impious rich.[8] [Fig. 38]

Mexico has a strong tradition of political newspapers, backed by the disinterestedness of men who have gone to jail, have seen their presses smashed, and have had their skulls cracked and their papers suppressed, all for the sake of keeping an opposition alive. When official art tended to freeze into decorum, when only neo-Greek Venuses tickled the taste of the bourgeois in power, opposition cartoonists, aiming their sharp lithographic crayons at the livers of powerful opponents, kept alive the quota of dynamism and unnicety without which Mexican art would quickly wither. Dictators and emperors were cartooned and lampooned literally to death by men who dared to die in turn.

Equally doomed by the success or failure of their endeavor, these penny sheets could not outlast the issues they raised. Only their names have kept a sting: *The Mustard Plaster, The Black Widow, The Gut-Grater, The Tickles, The Shark, The Carving Knife, The Devil's Lantern, The*

6. Released on July 2 and 8, and two more on July 12.
7. Published in *El Machete* on September 11.
8. "El Machete sirve para cortar la caña,
para abrir las veredas en los bosques umbríos,
decapitar culebras, tronchar toda cizaña,
y humillar la soberbia de los ricos impíos."

Devil's Spurs, The Loose-Mouthed, The Whip, The Scorpion, The Blind Man's Club.

Mildly named and longer lived than most was the far from mild *Orchestra,* which featured Constantino Escalante's masterly lithographs until his death in 1868. These cover the Juárez reforms, the French invasion, Maximilian's empire, and the two Juárez Republics. Escalante was as a rule "against it." He lovingly dwelled on the picturesque Zouave's uniforms, but their unhappy owners are impaled on the spikes of magueys, drubbed by barbed cacti. General Zaragoza funnels horse pills into a sick Napoleon III; a comical Maximilian lends his imperial foot to be kissed. Juárez is a tuna, the savory fruit of the nopal, protected from French appetites by bristling vegetable bayonets. Mexico is a bronze-skinned, plume-skirted Indian maiden who lolls in a hammock tied to palm trees. She greets the landing of the minute, pompous Frenchmen with a smile and a popular refrain, "Here come the monkeys."

Another famous sheet was *El Ahuizote,* named after a nahuatl monster whose voice lured men to an aquatic death. It published Villasaña's great lithographs of the seventies. Truly "a blind man's club," it helped crush a democratic president, Lerdo de Tejada, and boosted as a hero young General Don Porfirio Díaz. A generation later *El Hijo del Ahuizote* (*El Ahuizote's* Son) undid in three decades that bridge both centuries what its father had done. It swatted mature Don Porfirio until his senile exile.

In 1911–13 a new *Ahuizote* kept its cartoons aimed at President Francisco Madero up to the minute he was actually shot in the back. In this paper José Clemente Orozco cut his milk teeth to razor sharpness on the martyr Madero. A decade later *El Machete,* heir of a long and lusty tradition, again found in Orozco its most devoted illustrator.

The paper was financed by the Syndicate. The red embellishments meant extra printing and expense, and Graciela Amador, wife of Siqueiros, composed a ditty for contributions to the "red" fund:

> For that heavenly red to stay,
> Pay.[9]

9. "El que quiere su rojo celeste,
Que le cueste."

HOMENAJE AL
GENERAL EMILIANO ZAPATA
EN EL ANIVERSARIO DE SU MUERTE

La Tierra es de la Comunidad,

Y sus Productos de Quien la Trabaja

LOS SABIOS CONSEJOS DE ZAPATA Y MONTAÑO

CORRIDO

La Escena Pasa el día 10 de Abril de 1923

xxii. Xavier Guerrero, ZAPATA, woodcut illustration of a *corrido*. From *El Machete*, April 10, 1923.

Its first number was registered at the post office on March 6, 1924. A large format sheet stamped with bold black, white, and red woodcuts, it lived through seventeen numbers, until November 1924, when it got out of the hands of the painters and into those of the Communist party. As happens with penny sheets the world over, *El Machete* was read and discarded; libraries did not bother to save its issues, and only one collection of the paper is known to exist today (Text fig. XXII).

A close relationship with the mural movement gave correlative interest to the illustrations, as when Guerrero showed the muralist at work, flanked by armed peasant and worker. Or when Siqueiros cut in wood heroic types similar to those he was painting in fresco. Orozco contributed pen-and-ink drawings reproduced in photoengraving. Once his work is accepted in its entirety and the taboo now clamped on his cartoons lifted, these *Machete* illustrations will rate high. They are ugly, rabid, unjust, and masterly, and managed without a whiff of primitivism to hold their own beside blatant headlines and the insistent grating chord—white, black, and red—of the robust woodcuts, adzed rather than burined.

Only because they wanted to put across a message did the muralists turn engravers. They were awkward at their new craft. The desire to enunciate clearly, the strong mural style regardless of scale, the authentic primitivism of engravings carved with a pocket knife, rich in art and short on skill, the unequal pressure on inked blocks hardly level with the type and the resulting coarse printing, even the tone blocks that smudge with red the design—all combine to make an effective impact.

Content was on a par with form. *El Machete* No. 3 printed a cut by Siqueiros, of a kneeling worker, arms tied behind his back, flagellated, bleeding through an allover pattern of gashes, a Marxist version of the peculiarly Mexican Christs of Solitude, whipped to the bare ribs, that are found in village chapels. Its caption: "It is in this attitude, unarmed, kneeling, flagellated, and imploring mercy, that land owners, industrialists, oil men, and all Mexico's wealthy men in general, wish to see the workers forever." (Fig. 39). Sometimes the punch was packed in a short line. Another Siqueiros woodcut shows

the embrace of worker, soldier, and peasant. Its caption: "We three are victims—We three are brothers."

Guerrero cut in wood the scene of the repartition of lands, the federal agent unfolding a blueprint and raising his hand in an oratorical gesture, while a white-clad, patient Indian crowd sits or stands. Heroes and villains are painstakingly differentiated. In the sky over the chaste crowd hovers a trinity of evil, prince Satan and his team of hired hands, bourgeois and landowner. Woven into the design is a summing-up caption: "After twelve years of fighting, the land must be owned by those who work it with their hands" (Fig. 38).

Beside prints, a substantial feature were the *corridos,* doggerel poems and playlets, written mostly by Graciela Amador. Length and rhyme hardly hindered their sharp timing. One example of the type of event that gave rise to such poetry is the following: Soon after the march on Rome, Fascism thought of selling itself to the world as easily as it had to the Italian king. The ship "Italia" was rigged and sent on the errand, crammed with a cultural cargo that ranged from World War I tanks to art and artists. On board was an ambassador at large, his goateed excellency Giovanni Giurati. Also exhibited in the flesh, together with his masterpieces, was Giulio Aristide Sartorio, painter of "Prelude to Spring," "Evenings in the Roman Countryside," "The Wise and Foolish Virgins," and so on. His equal in talent, Leonardo Bistolfi, dubbed "the sculptor of thought," was represented by such allegories, tenderly caressed in marble, as "The Sphinx," "Beauty and Death," "The Spirit of Youth at the Tomb of a Young Poet," "Sorrow Comforted by Memories."

Impressed, the Mexican government sent a reception committee to greet the Italia. So eager were its members to visit the magical ship that they boarded it on the high seas! His Excellency reciprocated with a champagne lunch on board. The mainland answered with an elephantine *jarabe tapatío,* danced at the Vera Cruz landing and sung by a thousand voices that easily drowned out the hostile manifestations staged in side streets by stevedores' unions. A special train took Giurati, Sartorio, et al. to the capital to shake hands with the President.

Here was an issue that combined politics and art to perfection.

Fond of pre-Hispanic carvings, Syndicate members could hardly be impressed by the chisel of Bistolfi, famed for transmuting stone into gelatinous gray-matter. Ardently in search of a mural monumental style, how could they countenance the faint neo-impressionism of landscapist Sartorio? And the Syndicate was just as little inclined to fondle Mussolini.

Lightning struck at the end of a supper offered by the Ministry of Education. As the gay clanking of spoons of the ice-cream fed voyagers gave way to the numbness that heralds speeches, members of the Syndicate appeared outside the high windows and let a red, black, and white snow of *Machetes* flutter down. Each featured, under a disrespectful Orozco pen-and-ink portraying the diners, a skit called "Fascist Pets."[10] The sheets of *El Machete* were paginated in reverse, with the contents of the first page printed on the verso of the last sheet. This apparent oversight allowed a straight reading of the paper once it was unfolded and used as a poster. Said Guerrero of the early days:

> We wrote the articles, drew the illustrations, carved the blocks; we printed and folded the paper, delivered it, and paid all costs. The government was against us and we worked in secret. At four in the morning, street lamps were extinguished, and there remained a short time before the first stirrings of day. Then

10. *El Machete*, No. 11, Aug. 26–Sept. 4, 1924. Four of the strophes are as follows:

Remember, Pipi, those halls so rich,
Jam-full of statues and pictures.
Such painting makes our heart twitch.
Such art our aloofness punctures!'

Indeed, deary the Bistolfis
Glazed with tears my sight.
My joy bubbled and fizzed
To see those nudes throbbing and white.

Of Sartorio the genial output
Pleased me most of this varied fare.
It shames the monkeys rolled in soot
That our local daubers call fair!

To opulent curves and lines musical
Our artists prefer monkeyshine.
They paint scarecrows with shapes whimsical
That heap ridicule on mine and thine.

> Siqueiros and I would sally forth, loaded with papers, brushes, and a pail of glue. In the dark we hurriedly pasted the *Machete* on strategic walls, and retreated before dawn.

Left of the left, the paper's contents were such that neither right, nor center, nor left could find any solace in it, and it was butted in turn by enraged politicians. Said Guerrero:

> We suffered collectively for the sake of the paper. Siqueiros was refused his Ministry salary for a drawing I had done, quite a strong one against imperialism; and I was ousted from my employment at the Ministry of Agriculture for an Orozco drawing of President Obregón, with moon face and upturned snout, consorting with Uncle Sam and an archbishop. The day after its publication, the President received the Secretary of Agriculture in audience, his one arm stretched forth holding the offending *Machete,* his round face peeking from behind the moon face that Orozco had drawn. "Look what one of your employees did to me!"
>
> "Well, Mister President, can I be inside his conscience?"
>
> "No, man, but you can fire him."
>
> The Secretary called me in turn to his desk, described the scene, fired me, and rehired me at the same salary, with the borrowed name of my grandfather.

The executive committee of *El Machete* was originally made up of Xavier Guerrero, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Diego Rivera. When Rivera's relation to the Syndicate was violently severed in July 1924, he was replaced by the communist R. Gómez Lorenzo, the first person to work on the *Machete* who was not an artist. Three months later the paper was transferred from the Syndicate to the Communist party. Its executive councils gently clipped from the sheet its excess of aesthetic delight, pared down its giant format, hushed its bold illustrations, and introduced halftones to replace the red woodblocks that made so bloody a splash. Cured of art, shrunken in size, and with a text written in an orthodox vein, *El Machete* survived until 1938 as the official organ of the Communist party.

CHAPTER 20

Ministry of Education: First Court

Vasconcelos achieved the creation of his ministry almost single-handedly. Such was his faith in his star that even before the ministry had legal existence, he started constructing the palace that was to house it. He personally brought the handsome building into being by begging from President and Treasury the means for construction while still president of the university. He began nearly from scratch, as he proudly reminded his listeners on inauguration day:

> The inhabitants of Mexico City will remember the mound of debris that filled the lot bound by the streets previously called Del Reloj, now 4th of the Argentine Republic, the ex-9th of Perpetua, now Republic of Venezuela, and part of the street of San Ildefonso. The ancient building of the Normal School for Women had been wrecked, and not restored for all of ten years.[1]

The means of accomplishing his aim were in themselves an adventure. In his own words, "One must note that at the time, the poor university had nearly no budget allowance of its own. Confronted with the necessity of violating the law made by President Carranza that all federal works must be financed by the Ministry of Communications, we started the work directly.[2]

His friend, the future rebel Adolfo de la Huerta, then Secretary of the Treasury, had conspiratorially agreed to "put at my disposal 25,000 pesos weekly for material and payroll."[3]

1. Speech on inauguration day, *Boletín*, 1 (1922), 5.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

As usual, Vasconcelos fortified the opinion of the main architect, Méndez Rivas, with the counsel of artists. His answer to licensed architects who grumbled at amateur interference was: "It is said that I use painters to plan architecture. In this I do not lack impressive precedents, and such honor makes up for the lack of originality of the procedure. Architecture is an art, and an art needs artists more than diplomas."[4]

Rivera amplified the story in 1924:

> Concerning the building of the Ministry of Education, I will remind architect Rivas that, as regards the solution adopted for the main façade, the proportion of ornamental members, the collocation, bulk, and character of the columns, he did neither reject nor disapprove the collaboration of this humble painter ... And as regards the open gallery that links the two wings of the building and divides its two courts, the only detail that shows character and originality and lends interest to a building begun by swarms of architects short on genius, leftovers of the Porfirian era, this open gallery was conceived ... by Councelor Vasconcelos, who is not an architect but a lawyer.[5]

We thus understand with what secret pride Vasconcelos pointed in his inauguration speech to "the two courts ... bound by the handsome open gallery that today meets our eyes."

This dream come true was not flawless. The new addition necessarily followed the general pattern of the wing begun under Díaz. Rivera, discounting the role of adviser that he had claimed previously, spoke in 1925 of "a bastard neo-Roman style, leaning at times to a kind of French Renaissance, and at others to a total lack of proportion and style."[6]

The inauguration of the new Ministry building took place on July 9, 1922. Photographs taken on that day show the three tiers of the two inner courts smothered under a Sunday crowd, the som-

4. "Los Pintores y la arquitectura," *El Universal,* May 3, 1924.
5. Letter dated April 24, 1924, *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2* (1924), 547–50.
6. "La Obra de Diego Rivera," special number of *El Arquitecto,* Sept. 1925, p. 19.

breros and white *calzoncillos* of the laborers who had a hand in erecting the building mingling with the black suits, stiff collars, and homburgs proper to pedagogues. Bands played, and Vasconcelos in a truly emotional speech reviewed the physical and spiritual idiosyncrasies of this, his own achievement. He then launched into a pleasant vision of embellishments yet to come:

> Concerning the decoration of the corridor walls, our great artist, Diego Rivera, has already sketched women in picturesque costumes typical of each of the States of the Republic, and plans a frieze ascending along the staircase. Its subject matter starts with the sea level, and its tropical vegetation melts into the landscape of our high plateau and culminates with the volcanoes. A skylight by Roberto Montenegro is to cap this ensemble, depicting an Indian shooting his arrow at the stars. The reception rooms will be decorated with fantastic drawings by Adolfo Best, and so on; each one of our artists will contribute in turn something to beautify this palace dedicated to knowledge and to art.[7]

Coming back to the present, Vasconcelos, in his usual way, linked arts and trades, artists and artisans. "And speaking of artists ... it would be unfair not to mention the stone cutters ... or to forget masons, unskilled laborers, carpenters, and useful plumbers."

With spirits satiated, the spectators turned to more substantial pursuits:

> At 1:30 P.M. the Citizen President of the Republic offered a banquet to teachers, employees, and laborers, dependents of the Ministry, and to the musicians of the bands... The three hundred tables on which the banquet was served were set up before 3 P.M.... Service for the first of two shifts of 3,500 guests each began as soon as an inopportune drizzle had stopped:

7. In *Boletín.*

MENU
Mexican Rice
Meat with tomato and chili
Mixed salad
Candied sweet potato
Beer[8]

Of the promised decorations, only the staircase was to develop according to plan. The "fantastic drawings" with which Best meant to beautify the reception rooms never materialized; in their place Montenegro came to delineate some of his own. Of the hundreds of panels that Rivera painted in the two courts, only two happened to match the "figures of women in picturesque costumes typical of each of the States of the Republic" of which the Secretary had seen sketches. Though different from the expected, what did happen proved in the end to be beyond even Vasconcelos' anticipation.

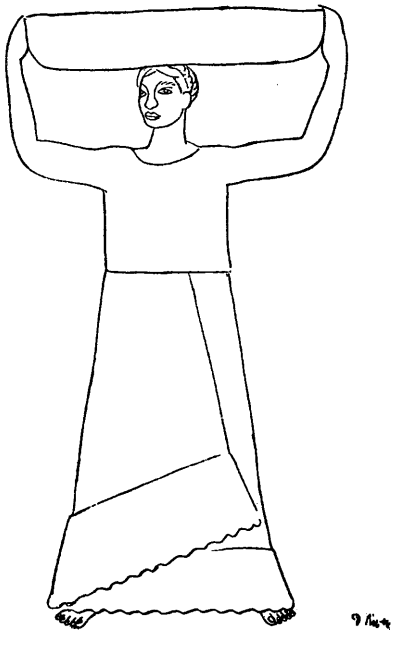
The contract scheduled the beginning of the new mural work for March 23, 1923. The terms were Spartan: 760 square meters to be painted at eight pesos per square meter, materials and labor at the expense of the contractor, Diego Rivera. On February 18 de la Cueva, Guerrero, and I left our discarded workshop at the auditorium to join the master mason, Luis Escobar, and to grind pigment and prepare the walls of the ministry. Salaries were as follows:[9]

Rivera	20.00
Assistant [Xavier Guerrero]	10.00
3 decorators [originally Guerrero, de la Cueva, and myself]	12.00
1 (master) mason [Luis Escobar]	4.50
1 (journeyman) mason	3.50
1 laborer	1.75
2 laborers	3.00
1 assistant	3.50
1 assistant	2.00

Having completed the auditorium with a boldly brushed view of the flora and fauna of the Tehuantepec jungle, Rivera started the

8. *El Universal*, July 10, 1922.
9. Wolfe, Diego Rivera, p. 218.

Ministry with his mind full of the recent sights of the tropics. The two first panels, enlarged from travel notes, depicted women of Tehuantepec carrying on their heads trays heaped with offerings of fruits and flowers (Text fig. XXIII). That among the many breeds that people Mexico Tehuanas were his first choice was a gesture that



XXIII. Rivera, TEHUANA WITH A BATEA ON HER HEAD, line drawing, 1922, used in his first fresco panels in the Ministry of Education. Collection Jean Charlot.

pleased Rivera's patron. Aside from their picturesque quality, the ladies were constituents of the state of Oaxaca where Vasconcelos was born. A candidate for the governorship of his native state the next year, 1924, Vasconcelos admitted that "on the isthmus I banked on the people in the public plaza, the sympathy of the women who sell their wares in the open-air markets, the handsome Tehuanas, proud of having been depicted on the walls of the buildings of the

Capital."[10] These twin panels, which flank the entrance to what was then an elevator shaft, are the first frescoes of mural caliber by one who came to be known as a master of the medium (Fig. 41).

Because Luis Escobar was now his mason and I was Diego's helper, these first two panels were executed according to the same procedures that I had used in my Preparatoria fresco. To change from encaustic to fresco proved a painful ordeal for Rivera. Late one of the first evenings that we were on the job, as I walked through the darkened court I noticed that the painter's scaffold was trembling as if at the start of an earthquake. Coming near, I saw Rivera's dim bulk at the top. Climbing up to investigate, I found him crying and viciously picking off his day's job with a small trowel as a child will kick down a sand castle in a tantrum. Guerrero witnessed similar tableaux in those hectic first days.

Xavier Guerrero understood that a remedy had to be found to allay a mental crisis that threatened to wreck the job at the start. At this juncture, he felt that some change in the technique used might prove efficacious.

My sources of fresco knowledge had been bookish, the treatises of Baudouin and Cennino Cennini. These had been tempered in practice by the common sense of master mason Escobar, not at all a bookish man. Xavier, speaking of Beaudouin, said, "I never read that book," and approached the same problem afresh, rich in his family experience of similar undertakings.

> Father used to put up a coat of mortar, then on top a coat of plaster mixed with marble dust, then paint an imitation marble design, then iron the surface as smooth as glass. I started from there, changing the plaster for lime. I experimented a long time on portable samples with mortars of distinct contents. I made trips to Teotihuacán to compare my results with pre-Hispanic murals, then made matched mural samples in the Ministry.
>
> At last I made a successful sample and proudly showed it to Diego. Said he: "We will save this sample, embed it in the finished work, and next to it paint your portrait with the date of the

10. *Desastre*, p. 349.

> discovery." I suggested that Diego let me take the sample out myself, as he is somewhat clumsy with his hands, but he insisted in doing it. He hammered the sample to bits, and the last rather large fragment to fall he crushed absent-mindedly under foot, and spoke no more of painting my portrait.

Xavier thus states the honest essentials of his experiments, but the best cure for Rivera's heartache proved to be a more dubious "secret," mainly the invention of overeager reporters. As Rivera's difficulties were mostly mental, the publicity that accompanied the discovery of the "secret" renewed his faith in himself, and the Ministry work proceeded smoothly from then on.

McKinley Helm came upon this secret while gathering material for his book, but it remained a secret for him: "They [Rivera and Guerrero] conducted experiments together and evolved a formula which was used in the newly built Ministry. Something untoward happened which both Rivera and Guerrero are now shy of discussing."

Contemporaneous sources are less reticent. The secret is first alluded to on May 31, 1923, by Renato Molina, in *El Universal Ilustrado:* "A new reason must be added to bolster our thankfulness toward the painter Diego Rivera. He is now revitalizing fresco painting just as it was practiced by the ancient Mexicans, a technique reconstructed thanks to his own investigations and those of his assistant."

El Universal of June 19, 1923, amplified the theme:

> DIEGO RIVERA DISCOVERS A SECRET OF THE MEXICA.
>
> The artist painter Diego Rivera has rediscovered, in the opinion of certain technicians of painting, the process used by ancient Mexicans to produce their splendid frescoes, such as those we admire today in the monuments of San Juan Teotihuacán.
>
> This extremely important and transcendental discovery seems quite simple. From what is said, it consists in using the procedure current among our more humble artisans of painting, that of mixing nopal juice with the fresco preparation,

completing the work with a special polish adopted after numerous trials by the helper of said artist Diego Rivera, Señor Xavier Guerrero...

At a date not so remote, a French painter allegedly applied the fresco technique in Mexico, such as the Italians had known it, but with the modification of mixing cement with the classic mixture of lime and sand. Notwithstanding the fact that the work executed by this French artist seems to fulfill certain conditions of permanency, experts agree that within the next twenty years the causticity of the calcareous substances present in the cement will completely destroy what this artist achieved.

The painter Diego Rivera used the same technique that the Frenchman had used and which we have just described, to paint a single panel out of those with which he is decorating the Ministry of Education, but given the poor results, he switched to the technique referred to already, with most gratifying effect. Numerous artists flock to the Ministry of Public Education to admire the brilliant decoration of Diego Rivera which, it is prophesied, will last for a number of centuries, as have the frescoes of the ancient Mexicans.

Crispin interviewed Rivera on the subject on July 10, 1923: " 'Who are your collaborators?' 'Xavier Guerrero, who, well knowing the craft of the painter in his noble approach to it as a laborer, discovered a process that resuscitates the manner of painting in fresco of the ancient Mexicans. I use this technique,' added Diego modestly."

El Abate Benigno invented a refrain:

Dipped in cactus juice authentic
Rivera's brushes in waltz time tick.[10a]

The invigorated Rivera imposed his technique, as "head of the Plastic Crafts," on the painters at work in the second court, de la Cueva and myself. It consisted, in practice, of slices of nopal leaf left

10a. *El Universal Ilustrado,* July 22, 1923, "Vals al Fresco":
"Con autentica bava de nopalera
Sigue pintando, arriba, su vals Diego Rivera."

to rot in the bucket of water in which we dipped our brushes. A cynical attitude toward the secret of the Mexicans and an abhorrence of the stink of the decomposed nopal stumps kept but few leaves in our two buckets, enough for inspection, and made us change the water surreptitiously.

Despite the layman's acclaim, Rivera soon shifted without fanfare to a chemically normal process. The secret, first tried in the Tehuantepec scenes—"Dyers," "Weavers," etc.—was last used on the "Potters." Time has helped transform the incident into a soothing myth. Rivera stated in 1942 that "There has never been through the last four centuries any decorator in Mexico master of his office who has not been master also of fresco painting. I feel proud to have learned this office from such men and not from any European."

Frederic W. Leighton wrote a description of the first court in the making, as it was in mid-1923, which explains, better than later reports, Rivera's original plan, before the introduction of decorative monochromes and symbolic tableaux:

> The right-hand wall as one enters the building is dedicated to two typical industries of southern and tropical Mexico: the raising of sugar and the weaving of cloth. The peasant cultivates and harvests the cane, works in the primitive mill where the juice is pressed and boiled and poured into rough molds to form the crude brown sugar or *panela* used from end to end of the land. The Indian works at the primitive hand-loom making the cloth for women's blouses and skirts, dyes the fabric in earthen jars, coloring it with home-grown indigo of the precious Tyrian purple laboriously extracted from the sea-sought cochineal. On the forward end wall for the patio are shown representative industries of the tableland of Mexico—mining, farming and pottery making. The miner descends to his obscure work and ascends in the evening twilight to be searched by the foreign mine-boss; he embraces the land-working peasant as a symbol of the fraternity of those who labor. Farther on may be seen the peasant men and women sitting patiently by their sown fields and the artisan who with infinite art fashions the

> decorated and shapely pottery that is used everywhere in Mexico. On the left wall are to appear labors of the north—the smelting of metals, farming and shepherding. Every picture is a bead on a rosary of the life of native Mexico [Fig. 42].[11]

A striking difference sets apart the frescoes of the first court of the Ministry from the earlier encaustic of the auditorium. The latter tended toward generalities: its symbolical figures were nude or clad in vaguely neoclassical drapes; their geometry edged toward the balanced semi-abstractions of Byzantium. In contrast, the Ministry frescoes allow for a leisurely description of folk types and customs, and include a wealth of local details—from sombreros to sandals—set in localized surroundings.

This drastic change may have been suggested in part by the new architectural postulate. The Ministry lacked the basilical overtones of the auditorium. Its paintable surfaces, mostly narrow upright panels, were half hidden by pilasters and arches, and the surface continuity was further split apart by doors. Such a setting did not admit of a single major and centralized focus. As the spectator walks along the narrow corridors he can appreciate each detail, but not the elusive ensemble. As he proceeds on his way, the appearance of new panels and subjects lends itself to anecdotal narration instead of to the simultaneous balance of parts featured in the auditorium.

Mexican roots affirm themselves at last. The subject matter is all-Indian, or if another race is introduced, it is only as a foil to the former. Such is the role of the Yankee and the Spanish overseers who embitter the Indian's lot in mine and hacienda. Overdoor verses from pre-Hispanic literature emphasize the Indian hue.

But despite the strong aboriginal flavor, once one has passed the hurdle of the engrossing subject matter, Europe still appears as a substantial stylistic factor. There are still inescapable points of contact between cubism and the first set of Ministry murals. In Paris cubist Rivera treated each easel picture as architecture, building it patiently up from the initial rectangle of the canvas. Muralist Rivera did not have to change his point of view, only the scale of his work.

11. "Rivera's Mural Paintings," *International Studio*, Feb. 1924.

Instead of the somewhat meager postulate offered by a single rectangular canvas, the architecture of the Ministry offered a more intricate starting point, but the geometrical principle remained the norm. Rivera confided to Walter Pach at the time: "If I was a cubist then, I am ten times as much a cubist today."[12]

As the scale of the personages became smaller and the subject matter more anecdotal, Byzantium receded as an influence and more intimate monuments of Italian art came to guide Rivera's style. He once mentioned to me what a lasting impression he had received from Francesco Cossa's "Triumph of Venus," where, as happens in nature, the compositional order did not imply a sacrifice of details; where a rabbit munching grass, correct as an abstract white area at a distance, proved upon closer examination to be described hair by hair on grass painted blade by blade.

In these, his earliest frescoes, Rivera had not yet developed the elaborate dialectical method that he was to use in the top-floor panels. There are as yet no barricades, no wicked rich eating ticker tape from gold platters, no cartoons identifying his personal enemies with those of the people, such as he was to paint later. Instead there are simple scenes, often imbued with a pious feeling akin to that of the church *retablos*. Miners descending into the mine shaft remind one of a *Via Crucis*. The dead worker and his mourners arrange themselves naturally into the semblance of a *Pietà*.

Early religious painters, unsure of their power to describe holiness, used the halo as its plastic equivalent and intertwined phylacteries in their compositions, elaborating the sacred meaning of the scene with words. Marxist Rivera also introduced symbols and written captions, as when he brushed in a minuscule hand in a corner of his "Exit from the Mine" the following ditty by the "poet in overalls," Gutiérrez Cruz:

> Comrade Miner,
> bending beneath the weight of the earth,
> your hand errs
> when it digs metals for money.

12. *The Freeman*, 1923; reprinted in Pach, *The Masters of Modern Art*, New York, Huebsch, 1924.

Make knives
with all metals
and thus
you will see how all metals
will be yours.[13]

Secretary of the Treasury Pani, who had been instrumental in bringing the painter back home from Europe, took an understandably professional exception to the rhymed suggestion and saw to it that Rivera chiseled out the offending poem.

The painting of the auditorium had proceeded indoors, under lock and key, as had the Parisian experiments in the fourth dimension that held a touch of alchemy. The Ministry was painted in full daylight and in full view of the people hustling through its corridors. People familiarized themselves with the physical appearance of Rivera as he followed his strange calling day after day, an average of sixteen hours a day:

> The sympathetic and voluminous Mexican painter was enthroned on one of the scaffolds that stand in the corridors of the Ministry of Education when our reporter approached him. Brush in hand, he was finishing one of the great frescoes. Passers-by walked under the scaffold in all haste, afraid that if Diego lost his balance he would mash them irretrievably...
>
> Seated on a plank that seems too frail a support for his gigantic body, Diego Rivera swings his legs. His trousers have worked up his calves revealing purple socks of cheap make... He is clothed in the same khaki shirt that we have seen him wear for the last two or three years. And the humbleness of his baggy trousers, of his shirt, of his socks, brings home the point that

13. "Compañero minero,
doblado por el peso de la tierra
tu mano yerra
cuando saca metal para el dinero.

Haz puñales
con todos los metales,
y así,
verás que los metales
después son para ti."

> this Mexican artist, whose talent nobody denies, actually lives like a worker.[14]

A cartoon picked up the theme. Diego from a scaffold to children watching:

> —You are interested. You like modern painting, don't you?
> —No, sir, we are waiting to see you take a fall.[15]

Of the many novelties that the murals flaunted before a public that on the whole lacked optical preparation, the major stumbling block was the problem of style—more so than even the use of aboriginal models or the controversial social content. The best prepared local amateur could hardly fill the gap in his art education between impressionism, acclaimed not long ago as the up-to-date pictorial language, and Rivera's style, rooted as it was in cubism, under a mask of willful naïveté.

As to the man in the street, if he thought of art at all, he thought of it in terms of Murillo. Not of the master he was, great lover of beggars, rags, and lice, but in terms of his religious potboilers, debased through generations of steel engravings and chromos. Another *sine qua non* of bourgeois art, and one not always compatible with the first, was its power to compete with photographs of pretty girls. In a bumbling criticism of Diego's work, Alvaro Pruneda revealed perhaps more of this average mental pattern than of the paintings he gravely purported to judge:

> In those frescoes Rivera is obsessed by female nudes. It seems that he picked the most repulsive lines and hues from a number of horrible women, and that for good measure he limited himself to the postures that were the least suggestive and stiffest... Deeply wounded is our aesthetic sensibility and violated is the sweet impress that the ideal delicacy of our beautiful women leaves in our mind. Let no one think that I have found the perfect woman, I mean on the artistic plane; my reference is to the more agreeable among the average ones...

14. *El Universal Gráfico*, June 30, 1924.
15. *El Demócrata*, Aug. 12, 1924.

> I looked in vain for something pleasing in those aboriginal nudes, that is, if not something pleasant as art at least something pleasurable to look at. I could no longer control my indignation: This is a joke! An offense! Fit to shame to a blush the beauty of our Indian girls' bodies, so firm of flesh, sculptured so incomparably by Nature's matchless hand... Classical Masters of sculpture and painting, you did not lie! Or if you lied it was to make Creation's most beautiful work—Woman!—even more beautiful.[16]

Sánchez Filmador illustrated the same touching point in doggerel:

> Despite her makeup, this one
> Is a miniature
> Worthy of the signature of Titian:
> Breath-taking, amigo!—but with her comes her mama,
> In her sixties or thereabouts,
>
> Fat as a barrel,
> With breasts that bob up and down,
> Nonetheless peroxided
> And the whole façade painted,
> Ready for the signature at one stroke
> Of, guess who?—Diego Rivera![17]

And the dialogued caption of a newspaper cartoon summed it all up tersely, if coarsely:

16. *El Universal Ilustrado*, March 5, 1925.

17. "Esa otra, con todo y pintura
Es una miniatura
Digna de que la firme hasta Tiziano.
¡Despampanante, hermano! pero con ella viene su mamá
De unos sesenta más o menos ya
Y gorda como una tinaja,
Con un pecho que trae de sube y baja,
Pero, esto sí, muy güera,
Y decorada toda la fachada
Para firmarla de una pincelada,
¿Que quien?—¡Diego Rivera!"

—It seems incredible that some boob would make passes at such a repulsive whore!

—Shut up, man. She is the favorite model of Diego Rivera.[18]

As soon as the first panels on Tehuantepec themes were finished, the Teatro Lírico put on a skit entitled "The Frescoes of Diego Rivera." In its final tableau a very male chorus in Tehuana skirts and cotton braids hopped in a cloppety-hop dance with platters of vegetables stuck to their wigs.

Toward the middle of 1923 the artists at work in the Ministry of Education became conscious of an antagonistic feeling in the air. While before that people had gone about their business giving only mock attention to the frescoes, angry groups now congregated in front of them, arms akimbo. In May we caught a news photographer sneaking behind a column in an attempt to snap Rivera's "Sugar-cane Cutters," mauled him, and smashed his plates. Realizing our awkward position as self-styled Painters for the People, it appeared to us that the more we delayed the exposure of our doings, the more chance we had of bringing our work to fruition.

The storm broke soon after. My diary mentions on June 20: "The *Heraldo* begins a campaign against Diego." Though I have not been able to locate a copy of the *Heraldo's* opening thrust I remember its content: The reporter, having heard of decorations being executed in the brand-new Ministry, came to admire them, buoyant with anticipation. Would he gaze upon elegant cavaliers in the style of Velasquez or beautiful Virgins worthy of the brush of Raphael! Speechless was the reporter before the evidence that his eye uncovered—cow-eyed monsters! He hinted further at a financial scandal, incapable artists fattening on the people's money.

My diary for June 22 mentions: "We publish a handbill to answer the attack on Diego." Perhaps not calculated to soothe feelings ruffled by the style of the frescoes, its text was pasted by Syndicate members at strategic street corners in the vicinity of the Ministry building:

18. *El Universal*, June 27, 1924.

PROTEST

A campaign has been launched against the present movement of painting in Mexico. This movement can be attacked only because of ignorance or envy. And to make the ill-timed blow more infamous, the movement is deliberately identified with personal politics. The stone of money is flung at us, stained with all that business of GREAT SQUANDERING, FABULOUS PRICES, ENORMOUS PROFITS, etc. The painter who earns most in the Ministry receives the wages of an artisan who paints walls flat by the square yard. The public can check this by examining the painters' contracts at the National Ministry of Education.

This protest is no apology ... our petty foes, for the sake of our country's progress and of good taste the world over, should be branded as ignorant and backward and treated as one treats those who will not be vaccinated, bathed, or taught their letters.[19]

The adverse reaction was immediate. *El Demócrata* mentioned in an editorial, "the opinion often advanced jokingly that, to the sums now paid to the painters, be they much or little, must be added the future sums to be paid to masons, when the time comes to whitewash the walls, a thing taken for granted."[20]

A lady stenographer chimed in:

Don Diego has called us imbeciles, prejudging that because we are employees of the Ministry we have neither criterion nor right to our own opinions ... When we visit an insane asylum and find among its inmates here a Napoleon, austere and impassive, there an Alexander the Great ... do we feel indignant? Do we start discussing whether or not these gents are genuine? Do we feel angry at the assumed personalities? No, the only words that come to our lips are words of mercy. The same should happen in the case of Rivera. No importance whatsoever

19. A fascimile on a reduced scale of the original handbill was printed in *El Universal Ilustrado*, June 28, 1923.

20. *El Demócrata*, July 5, 1923.

> is attached to the fact that he or any other believes himself to be Delacroix or Michelangelo.[21]

A reporter, Crispin, noted with sincere puzzlement: "The work of the Mexican painter Diego Rivera is subjected these days to the bitterest criticism and to most passionate praise. Some deny Rivera everything, even a knowledge of drawing, while others consider him the major painter of the Republic."[22]

Rivera was so busy painting that he had little time left to take part in aesthetic discussions. Of the storm that broke over his work he wrote philosophically: "Simple painter that I am, accustomed to attacks coming from many quarters, from learned scientists, sharp critics, illustrious nobodies, nabobs of envy, numberless mediocrities, and famous morons, I would rather bear such attacks without even attempting a defensive gesture, for nothing can stop cultured and decent Mexicans from abominating the paintings of Diego Rivera."[23]

Art can hold public interest only when there is a dearth of other news. Pancho Villa was assassinated on July 20, and the newspapers switched to the exciting topic. They featured photographs of the riddled barrel-chested corpse and news of the mock hunt for the politically protected murderer. They also gave increasing space to the coming presidential elections to which this gore was but a curtain raiser. The art scandal faded in proportion, and disappeared from the news.

21. Letter published in *El Universal Ilustrado*, dated June 30, 1923, signed: "Una Taquígrafa circumstancial."
22. "El Paisajista que se echó a perder," *El Universal*, July 10, 1923.
23. In *El Demócrata*, July 21, 1924.

CHAPTER 21

Ministry of Education: Second Court

Other murals were executed in the Ministry building at the same time as the Rivera frescoes of the first court. Carlos Mérida and Emilio Amero painted in the public library annex to the building, and Xavier Guerrero, Amado de la Cueva, and myself decorated the second court.

Carlos Mérida, whose role as a pioneer of the movement has already been reviewed, did two murals. The story of Red Ridinghood decorated the children's reading room in delicate pastel tones, with captions by the future Nobel Prize winner, Gabriela Mistral. In the room originally reserved for magazines and newspapers, Mérida painted in a more somber key of mauves, copper, and fruity greens, tropical types reminiscent of his native Guatemala rather than of his adopted Mexico. Flaked-off pigment and lavish patches of white, where the wall has been resurfaced, today make a just appreciation of the ensemble difficult; all the more so as Carlos refused to comment on these decorations. He only suggested that they be mentioned, if at all, as essays somewhat outside his main work.

Emilio Amero wrote a note for this book about the making of his Ministry murals:

> I was working at the time with Carlos Mérida when Licenciado José Vasconcelos asked me to plan a decoration for the main reading room of the Ministry of Education. I simply sketched what seemed to me best for the purpose; in truth the problem was not very complex, for only a meager space was open for painting. The walls were divided by large windows

eight feet high, and the spaces in between were just large enough for a single figure. In consequence, I planned for each panel a monumental figure measuring some twelve feet high. The whole was meant to personify the various races of Central and South America, in accordance with the name of the Library, which, if I remember correctly, was Library of the Americas or Ibero-American.

With the help of Victor Reyes I measured the walls, completing with some care and precision a first project. After changing the over-all hue a number of times, I presented the sketch to Licenciado Vasconcelos who, having studied it, told me to show it to Rivera...

After looking at it, Rivera said it was rather interesting, but doubted that Vasconcelos would let me paint in fresco—I had learned the technique of fresco at first from Charlot, and afterward from Alva de la Canal and Revueltas. The reasons that Rivera advanced were that the Secretary meant to finish the reading room at the earliest possible date, and that it was improbable that I would be allowed to destroy walls that had already been surfaced; for I would have had to remove the smooth finish to proceed in *buon fresco*. I therefore had to paint in tempera.

While scaffolds were being built, I experimented with various media to find a fairly permanent tempera, finally adopting a casein base. Having done a first drawing at wall scale, I began to paint the central figure *in situ*, working day and night. My helpers and I would work surrounded by the unfinished Library's furnishings, great heaps of books, and stacks of furniture.

Learning that we were at work, Rivera appeared when the painting was half finished. I will always remember what he said: "Amero, my compliments for what in truth is the most Mexican of the things painted up to now." Naturally I felt encouraged, and decided to put all my strength into making this decoration one of the best.

But—that very same day in the afternoon, Licenciado Vasconcelos came to pay us a call and in his usual direct way told

> me to stop painting. I asked what his reasons were, and he became angry and said that he did not have to give me any; he was the Secretary, and he was tired of so many painted Indians. He went on to say that if I wanted to go on painting, I would have to choose a subject more important than Indians—for example Homer's *Iliad,* with classical Greek figures, or Cervantes' *Don Quixote;* and that very night, the scaffolds, stepladders, and pigments were all removed from the Library.

The second court of the Ministry was originally assigned to Amado de la Cueva, Xavier Guerrero, and myself. The plan of work was patterned after the closing tenets of the program of the Painter's Syndicate, which had up to then remained untried: "The Syndicate is in favor of collective work. It desires to destroy all egocentrism, replacing it by disciplined group work, the great collective workshops of ancient times to serve as models ... To practice these postulates ... it will also elaborate a communal plan for the application of the principle of work in common."[1]

All three of us had helped Rivera in the auditorium, and my mural in the staircase of the Preparatoria was finished. We three moved from the school to the Ministry of Education on February 18, 1923, to grind pigments and prepare the walls of the first court for Rivera's coming, scheduled for March 23, the day on which his contract became operative.

In 1922 I had already combined the role of being Rivera's helper with that of frescoing a wall of my own, but for my Preparatoria mural a contract was drawn between the director of the school and myself, designs were approved directly by Secretary Vasconcelos, material expenses provided, a time limit set. At the Ministry, however, we knew of no contract defining our collective responsibilities, nor did we know to whom we were answerable.

Rivera, in a letter to the Comptroller of Accounts, written in 1923, disclaimed knowledge of a contract: "the painting ... of the second patio ... with which the contractor Rivera has had nothing to do because the Citizen Secretary ordered the works of the inner patio,

1. For the complete text, see Chapter 19.

the undersigned merely directing them as head of the Department of Plastic Crafts in the Ministry of Education."[2]

No specific time was put aside for this work out of our full-time job as Rivera's helpers, no material expenses provided, no time limit set. This arrangement was inauspicious, but an implicit trust in Rivera's ethics, a great good will to do communal mural work, and the resiliency of youth led us to believe that we could overcome this initial handicap.

Of the three painters ready to do team work, Xavier Guerrero was the one most naturally attuned to it (Fig. 43). Montenegro at first, and after him Rivera, had leaned on Guerrero, asking him to translate into correct technical terms their aesthetic ideas. When Xavier started to work on the second court of the Ministry, he had already worked with distemper in San Pedro y San Pablo and with encaustic in the auditorium, and was working in fresco in the first court of the Ministry. In each case Xavier had modified the European procedures and ingredients to meet the new geographical and racial conditions.

Siqueiros wrote of Guerrero, as he remembered him at the time: "More than a fine-arts artist, he was a worker in practical painting, a studious searcher for autochthonous material, a discoverer of traditional landmarks. A good walker, he ambled through most of our regions, unearthing plastic secrets. He was both the worker and the scientist of our group."

The second painter of the team, Amado de la Cueva, also came from Jalisco. The governor of the state, Basilio Vadillo, had sent Amado to Europe to further his studies. He returned to Mexico in September 1922, from a grand tour of Spain, France, and Italy. As was the case with Siqueiros, his great hero was Masaccio, and he brought back exquisite pencil copies of details from the Brancacci Chapel (Fig. 44).

The court that we three were to decorate was named the Court of Labor and Festivals, and was to receive an equal number of panels on each theme. Before we began its south wall, we planned a work-

2. For the complete texts of the Comptroller's letter to Rivera and Rivera's answer, see Wolfe, *Diego Rivera*, pp. 218–21.

ing diagram that alternated both subjects and painters. The first hint of future difficulties came when Rivera asked that the wider end panels be reserved for himself.

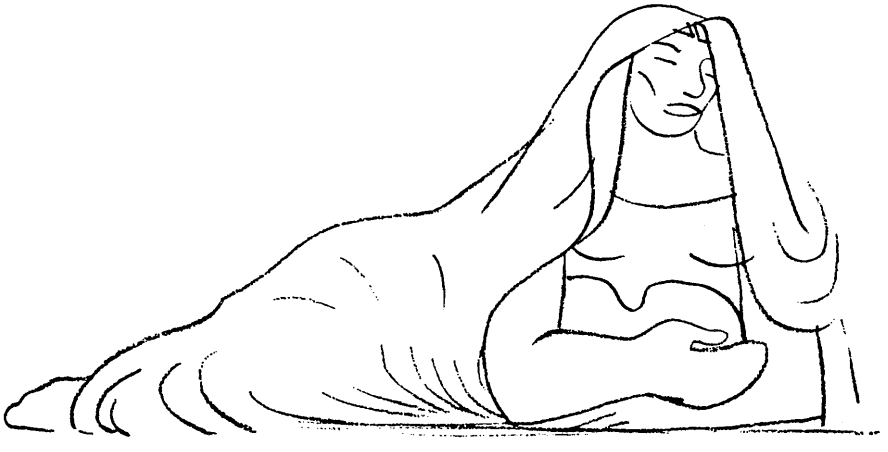
My diary records the progress of our work in the second court, as well as the incidents that quickly doomed it:

> May 21, 1923: Work on cartoon ["Cargadores"].
> May 26: Finished cartoon.
> May 29: Wall begun.
> May 31: Wall finished.
> June 15: Draw cartoon second panel ["Dance of the Ribbons"].
> June 22: Finish same cartoon.
> June 25: Begin second panel.
> July 9–10: Diego angry, refuses guarantees for our work. We decide he must change his mind or that we will leave.
> July 16: With Amado, I smooth over the complications with Rivera.
> July 19: Finish second fresco. Work until 8:30 P.M. (Fig. 45a).
> July 20: Help Amado who begins.
> July 21: Study cartoon panel No. 3 ["Lavanderas"].
> July 22: Finish cartoon.
> July 23: Begin third panel.
> August 2: Finish third fresco.
> August 6: Diego tells us that we are not to paint the court any more.
> August 7: Vasconcelos tells us to proceed.
> August 8–9–10: Difficulties with Diego.
> August 11: Do we return to work?
> August 16: I leave the Ministry to work with Alfaro in the small staircase of the Preparatoria.

I worked a while as helper to Siqueiros, meanwhile looking for some work to do on my own.

> September 11: Look for a wall in San Pedro y San Pablo.
> September 12: Vasconcelos refuses me the wall and puts me to work painting a coat of arms.

Amado de la Cueva went through a similar experience, and managed to paint two panels before he met with similar defeat (Fig. 45b). As for Guerrero, he had become indispensable to Rivera as a helper. "He who, in his humble approach as a laborer, understands so well the painter's craft"[3] received many such verbal bouquets from the master, but was denied time to work on his own murals. Guerrero managed, however, to paint the two over-door panels that flanked the "Cargadores," reclining mural figures swathed in *rebozos* (Text fig. XXIV).



XXIV. Xavier Guerrero, sketch done in 1947 from memory of one of his over-door panels in the Ministry of Education, painted in 1925.

Sometime between August 6 and August 11 an incident took place that is better related in the words of Siqueiros:

> Amado de la Cueva and Jean Charlot came to complain that Diego Rivera had fired them from their work. Rivera had done this without the least explanation and without posing the problem before our Syndicate. In my role of General Secretary I went to ask him his reasons for this procedure. From the scaffold, where he was engrossed in his work, Rivera answered ill-humoredly: "Al que no le guste el fuste, que lo tire y monte en pelo," a proverb meaning "If you think the saddle has a flaw,

3. Crispin, "El Paisajista," *El Universal*, July 10, 1923.

throw it away and ride bareback." I retorted that this was no sort of argument... Rivera chose to stop talking, and I faced the first problem within our organization. How could I force into submission the most mature and famous member of the Syndicate I represented? The accidental presence of Revueltas provided an answer ... I suggested to him that we go and drink a tequila at the corner saloon, and when the Mexican vodka had its impulsive effects, I planted the problem squarely before my friend. Who did Rivera think he was!!! Did he hope to mock an authority that was the sum of that of all members combined into a common structure?

We started resolutely to the place where the painter was; resolute we stood under his scaffold and, lifting our voices with dignity, we both said: "Fascist!!" Diego received this rear attack as if it were a pitcher of cold water, and turned around with a look of surprise and apprehension. We renewed the attack, "Come down!!" said we. Somewhat paralyzed he looked at us. We lunged forward with total unanimity, "Come down or we'll bring you down, shooting!"

Rivera knew that Revueltas had an easy trigger finger... The affray had attracted a gathering of people; Diego, giving us a tactical smile, slowly mobilized his bulk in answer to our categorical order. Once down, he suggested that we go to the nearby workroom where materials were kept. We agreed.

Once in, Diego closed and locked the door. We accused him harshly. His defense was that all master painters have freedom to choose, substitute, and fire collaborators; otherwise the technical angle would suffer; the Syndicate should only treat of problems between members and capitalistic contractors; he was no contractor but a member of the Syndicate, a member even of its Executive Committee. We countered with the fact that his job as master of the works did not give him license to proceed totally *en marge* of the most elementary principles of comradeship and disciplinary usage that should rule the inner workings of our Syndicate. We added that to mention the proverb "If you think the saddle has a flaw, throw it away and

ride your horse raw" was bourgeois manners, dictatorial and autocratic, and besides it showed disrespect for me, who was his hierarchical superior.

But in the thick of our reprimands, and as his face showed increasing compunction, Rivera's former wife, Sra. Guadalupe Marín de Rivera, arrived. Finding the door closed from the inside, she shrieked at the top of her voice, calling us "rascals and mountebanks" and reviling her husband for being a coward and poltroon. She advised him to pull our pants down and spank our behinds....

Something had to be done or victory would slip from our grasp. Quickly, instinctively, with no word exchanged, Revueltas and I divided our forces; he would take care of Rivera until my return, and I would exert force on the beauteous lady from Jalisco. Opening the door, I took her by the arm and, disregarding her *moulinets* and writhings, put her under lock and key in another room, and took the key with me.

The discussion was resumed. Rivera agreed to allow the fired comrades to return to their jobs until the Assembly ruled upon it. We shook hands on it and I gave Rivera the key to his wife's freedom. As Revueltas and I left with clear consciences, we could still hear the blasphemies hurled by the imprisoned Guadalupe."[4]

From that time on, we were put to menial tasks, among them the painting of the heraldic shields of the twenty-eight states of the Republic on the second floor of the second patio, with Rivera as "Head of the Department of Plastic Crafts" acting as supervisor. Difficulties continued:

September 24: Diego is heavy-handed in the use of his authority.

October 3: Diego unbearable.

October 8: Amado is leaving. His salary is held up because he has not completed two shields per week.

October 16: Amado leaves.

4. "Autobiografía."

De la Cueva left for Guadalajara, where State Governor Zuno was to give him the chance of painting murals that was denied him in Mexico City.

"Lavanderas" was the last fresco that I painted in Mexico. With walls denied me, I re-educated myself somewhat shamefacedly to easel painting of small dark pictures, starting in January 1924.

Our work in the second court was done between May 19 and August 6. In this short span of time Amado and I managed to fill our quota of the work allotted, and Guerrero, lacking free time, still did his best. In all, seven panels were thus executed in two and a half months under adverse conditions. This was no slack production even at the fast pace at which murals were painted in this early period. In the same length of time Rivera, staffed with masons and helpers, including both Amado and Guerrero, completed six panels on the west wall of the first patio, from the "Entrance to the Mine" to the "Potters," plus overdoor panels, which were mainly the work of Guerrero.

The first opinion of our work to appear in print was that of Crispin, published in July:

> As we consider the work initiated in the court of the Normal School by the young Frenchman, Charlot, and the young Mexican de la Cueva, an excess of indulgence would be needed to seriously discuss the dubious childishness and improbable ingenuousness of the personages that are thus being drawn and quartered on the walls of the Normal School by those exponents of an Abnormal School.[5]

Rivera's estimate was kinder:

> Xavier Guerrero has realized an ornamentation of great simplicity and purity and of a Mexicanism indisputably modern, devoid of picturesque or archeological compromise...
>
> Amado de la Cueva and Charlot painted in the patio of the Ministry of Education things of strong interest; Charlot disassociated himself from the Wagnerism with which he had been

5. "El Paisajista."

somewhat anointed in his decoration of the Preparatoria; he entered into the Mexican mode of feeling and the good and firm expression of French plasticity, doing things that take their place among those of the highest character and quality executed here.

In the same patio Amado de la Cueva, the most unjustly treated among the younger painters, painted two frescoes that will remain for all time among the best references on the initiation of the movement; they possess simplicity, an intonation of great delicacy, and a clear sense of decorative composition; together with those of Charlot, these two mural panels of undeniable beauty remain forgotten behind piles of benches and boxes, for those two young painters were our army's casualties under fire.[6]

This endorsement by Rivera of our work and of our conduct is untainted by personal motives. When he wrote it in 1924, he still had much to paint in the first court and its adjoining staircase, which was not finished until January 1925; it was only then, after he had successfully weathered the political storm raised by the resignation of Vasconcelos and consolidated his position with the new Secretary, Dr. Puig, that the decoration of the second court became a personal problem.

The new decoration that Rivera started to paint then in the second patio and which eventually superseded our own, fused three panels out of each wall into a central triptych. The planning of such a triptych for the south wall implied the destruction of my "Dance of the Ribbons," already painted in its center panel. Rivera, who one year before had complained that our work remained forgotten behind piles of benches and boxes, went a drastic step further in sending it into oblivion. He also decided to destroy the two Guerrero panels. The "great simplicity and purity" that he had praised in Guerrero's work, the "Mexican mode of feeling and good and firm expression of French plasticity" that he had admired in mine, failed to save our murals. I knew of his intention and hoped to carefully

6. "Diego Rivera discute," *El Demócrata*, March 2, 1924.

chop off a choice bit of my panel to keep as both souvenir and justification. But early one morning, entering the court with Pablo O'Higgins, I found that the masons had hammered it all down without previous notice. A search of the debris for a crumb large enough to include a bit of design proved fruitless.

The deed done, Rivera was to refer disparagingly from then on to what he had before praised so well:

> It had been decided at first that the Court of Festivals was to be painted by this writer's companions; the work was begun by Jean Charlot, Amado de la Cueva, and Xavier Guerrero; but alas the unity, of itself so terribly difficult to achieve in this vast work, was not helped by the multiplicity of artists who, formed by individualistic habits, were not able, in spite of all their good will, talent, and effort, to maintain themselves within a homogeneity, while perhaps sacrificing a substantial part of the personal interest that their work could have achieved individually. To begin with, in eight months of work they succeeded in painting no more than five wall panels and two overdoor panels, out of the thirty-three that the court contains; though in truth they were continually harassed and interrupted in their work to paint, on the second floor of this court, the more or less authentic or fantastic heraldry of the Federated States that make up this Union, by decree of Vasconcelos.[7]

This text gave the tune to his future biographers, who twitter to it like birds in chorus. Thus Woolf was led to say in his eulogy of Rivera: "By the time Diego had finished his entire patio and an entire world had come to life upon its walls, the 'collective' had succeeded in completing only four of the twenty-four paintings which, according to the contract, they were to have done in the same length of time."[8]

This "authorized" version has now prevailed as history, yet I cannot but find Rivera's 1924 epitaph on our mural work, very apt: "Those two young painters were our army's casualties under fire."

He does not add that we were shot in the back.

7. "La Obra de Diego Rivera," *El Arquitecto*, Sept. 1925.
8. Wolfe, p. 191.

CHAPTER 22

The Preparatoria Riot

One of the bloodiest side-products of the de la Huerta military uprising was the execution of the Governor of Yucatán, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, along with his three brothers and ten of his followers, in the Mérida cemetery on January 3, 1924. Though hardly an artistic event, it had an indirect repercussion on the Mexican mural movement, whose first cycle was hurried to a close that same year.

Federal partisans of the murdered governor of Yucatán took steps to avenge him. On January 14 the labor leader Morones rose at the tribune of the Senate to state the new policy of the labor party. It was to hound into exile whichever politicians remained in sympathy with the rebel movement. "We will," said he, "take direct action against them." A week later, Senator Field Jurado, a de la Huerta sympathizer, was murdered while strolling in the street, and the public philosophically accepted this crime as the first fruit of the promised harvesting.

The headlines of *El Universal* on January 29 read:

> RESIGNATION OF SECRETARY OF EDUCATION VASCONCELOS
>
> Yesterday at 10 A.M. Sr. Vasconcelos sent a message to the Sr. President, in which he states the reasons that oblige him to present his formal resignation... One of the main reasons, it is said, is the attack on Field Jurado.

And on January 31: "Vasconcelos is to keep his portfolio... The President has taken personal steps to clear his administration of

responsibility in the aggressions committed under the pretext of direct action."

Though spared for the time being, the Secretary had put his President on the defensive and shown affinity with the rebel faction. The move was bound to sap his political strength and shorten his political life, with the consequent weakening of the painter's position. Ernest Gruening had justly remarked that the muralists were dependent on the Secretary in the same way that painters of the Italian Renaissance were picked and protected by popes, princelings, or reigning *condottieri*. In Mexico, as in Renaissance Italy, the one-man amateur jury had proved wiser than art commissions made up of tested graybeards. But government support of artists does not often outlast the power of one man. When he falls, his favorites, minions, courtiers, bodyguards, and artists all fall with him. In Mexico the public took it for granted that once Vasconcelos was down, the never-popular brand of art that he had sponsored would be speedily demolished.

A critic of the old guard, Nemesio García Naranjo, voiced the accepted conservative point of view:

> Such works have been carried to a conclusion, not in a noble exercise of freedom, but owing to the hermetic and despotic dictatorship of a small literary group now in power, an imposition that weighs like stone on the spirit of the whole nation....
>
> The imposition is not restricted to boosting Rivera as a rival of Velasquez and branding his critics as dumbbells; it has also stuck his pictures on walls that are by now irreclaimable. Why etch a controversial work on walls instead of on canvas or on a panel! Once a work of art ... is incrusted into a wall, people stand between the two horns of a dilemma: to accept the work or to destroy it.
>
> ...Because walls cannot be separated from the building and put into storage, if one wishes to avoid the sight of the pictures, one's only recourse is to erase them, to destroy them.
>
> Any course of destruction carries tremendous responsibilities and should be flatly rejected. There then remains no other

> choice but to accept the work by imposition despite a public opinion that clamors for tools to scrape off what it deems aberrations and monsters.[1]

The statement can be construed as an incitement to destruction that the cautious last paragraph is hardly meant to check.

Direct action, though inauspiciously ushered in with a murder, caught the general fancy and became fashionable in word and fact. Labor unions, politicians, the theatre, and the press all dabbled in direct action. The young plunged into it, and the loudest among them were the irrepressible students of the Preparatoria and its annexes, the Medical College and the Law School.

Mexico City, City of Palaces, had just received a palatial addition of which only one man could boast. The flamboyant Dental Palace of Dr. Islas was a ripe specimen of the Barnum style. Teeth exhibiting a wealth of cavities were daubed on a heroic scale on every available foot of its façade. Showcases gleamed on the sidewalk, bulging with yellow teeth painlessly extracted. Jumbo signs dangled overhead, shouting the praises of "Alfonso Islas, D.D.S."

On June 11 citizens breakfasted with a chuckle, as they read reports in the morning papers of a comical scuffle between students and the hapless Dr. Islas that involved the wrecking of his palace by direct action. Like many others, I loitered that day on the spot sprinkled with broken glass, canines, and molars, little knowing that a link was being forged between this laughable incident and bitter events to come, bitter at least for the muralists at work in the Preparatoria School.

Students Practice Direct Action

> Gathering in force at the office of Alfonso Islas, they pelted it with rotten eggs, tore down its signs... One of the students vigorously reproached Dr. Islas as a fraud for assuming the title of Graduate Dentist of the Faculty of Mexico, and demanded that the posters advertising this lie be taken down.... Then direct action started. A rain of rotten eggs fell on the façade.

1. "Imposiciones estéticas," *El Universal*, July 16, 1924.

> Passers-by shouted with delight at the free show. The bombardment of rotten eggs left the building a pitiable sight, with an unbearable stink floating over the spot.... The odontological students returned to their building with the looted signs, tore them to pieces, and set them afire.[2]

Thus ended direct action.

Having enjoyed this novel brand of practical pranks, the students were soon looking for new victims. They did not have to look far, for while the destruction of Sr. Islas' establishment involved a walk of a few blocks, they had overlooked within the walls of their own Preparatoria building the bizarre murals that Orozco and Siqueiros were studiously completing. As long as Vasconcelos was securely in power the painters were able to work, but now his strength was crumbling, and with it the relative immunity extended to his protégés. On June 21 newspapers carried the advance rumor of Vasconcelos' second, and final, resignation. Were not the paintings to be covered with whitewash as soon as a new Secretary was ushered in? Better hurry and get at the walls before the official wreckers arrived. All saw the contemplated deed as another day of fun and no harm done. In case of trouble, the connivance of superiors was assured. Had not "the most excellent President of the University, Sr. Chávez, declared on a certain occasion and in front of a substantial gathering of students, 'These paintings are not beautiful'"?[3]

On June 25 the second instance of a collegiate brand of direct action again made good copy for the morning papers.

THE WORKS OF DIEGO RIVERA CONDEMNED

> The Students of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria Began Yesterday the Destruction of Some Mural Paintings—They Refuse to Put Up With Such Monstrosities...
>
> Diego Rivera's pictorial works, which fill the walls of the building of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, have been sentenced to annihilation. The pupils of this institution, helped by

2. *El Universal*, June 11, 1924.
3. "Communist Manifesto," *El Demócrata*, July 21, 1924.

> others connected with the Ministry of Education, have yielded to the clamors of critics who judge these works to be truly monstrous, and at best insincere. They decided to apply direct action, in this case to destroy the works by erasing and scraping them off.
>
> So much has been said against these mural paintings and they breed such disgust in those who view them, that the pupils of the Preparatoria, in their own words, got fed up. Protests would pour in day after day, hour after hour. From all lips one heard despising and wounding words; one heard everyone asking, "Where is the beauty of these paintings?" which breed terror. Such a state of affairs came to inflame the spirit of the students, who, on the spur of the moment, and in defense of aestheticism, threw themselves against the "apocalyptic monsters" that are Rivera's version of the human form....
>
> Having once before waged a similar battle against the showcases containing the teeth and molars extracted by Dr. Islas, the adolescents of the Preparatoria proved themselves experts at making short work of some of these pictures, leaving them soiled and mutilated (Fig. 46).
>
> ...The students have pledged that "their work will not remain incomplete, nor will the work of Rivera remain complete." ... They plan to invite the pupils of other schools and branches of the University to join them and complete the work of destruction.[4]

Legal means were taken to enforce the success of direct action. While the riot was on, students had approached Vasconcelos with a petition whose content is easy to gather from the Secretary's answer. This last official act concerning painters was the attempt of a tired man, ready to quit, at cleaning the mural slate for his successor:

> Decoration Stopped—Acceding to the terms of a petition presented by the students, Sr. José Vasconcelos, Secretary of Public Education, decreed yesterday that the pictorial decora-

4. *El Universal,* June 26, 1924.

> tion now in course in the building of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, under the supervision of Don Diego Rivera, be stopped.
>
> The Secretary also decreed that one of the painters working under Sr. Rivera be dismissed, when it became known that he had instigated the students to exercise direct action by destroying one of his own pictures.[5]

The astonishing theory that one of the painters was to be blamed for the affray may refer in distorted fashion to either Orozco or Siqueiros, for both had painstakingly and with great conscience often done and redone vast portions of their work.

Orozco was dismissed on the same day that the riot took place. I noted in my diary: "Saw Orozco; he expects to be fired." That afternoon I sat with him on his scaffold. Turning his back on the freshly scarred murals, he vainly attempted to finish "The Siege of a Bank." His mood was sullen since he was working against time, pending the dismissal slip that he knew was forthcoming. One of the arguments publicly advanced to justify the wreckers was that the destroyed murals would have ridiculed Mexico in the eyes of American tourists. In answer, a group of United States citizens publicly declared themselves for the painters, a *beau geste* for the time. Carleton Beals and Anita Brenner circulated a petition in favor of the muralists. It was to be signed by foreigners only, a delicate move since Mexicans justly resent outside pressure on internal matters. Printed as a poster, it was displayed at street corners and was particularly evident in the neighborhood of the school.

When *El Demócrata* acknowledged receipt of the sheet on July 3, it was under a cynical headline meant to remind readers of the American armed disembarkment at Vera Cruz in the days of the cursed Victoriano Huerta: "The Mural Paintings of the Preparatoria at the point of provoking a *Casus Belli.*"

This courageous document, first to recognize modern Mexican art as transcending local interest, did much to stay the complete stoppage of the work:

5. *Excelsior,* June 26, 1924.

OPEN LETTER

Moved by a spontaneous feeling of indignation, the signers wish to register an active protest against the vandalism of a group of students of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria who mutilated with malice the frescoes painted recently there by Señores José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. As we are all foreigners, it seems at first that we should not intrude in Mexican affairs... Though deeply rooted in National culture, the arts, painting, music, literature, of a country become the patrimony of the world at large, which judges, possesses, and assimilates them, regardless of what nation begot them. Damaging the paintings of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria injures our cultural assets as well as your own.

...Among all cultured people, today's art topic is the new school of Mexican painting, one of the most admired things to come from Mexico...

Because we care for the future of Mexico, we need censure with all the more harshness such mutilations, given that the guilty students will become the intellectuals, engineers, lawyers, and doctors of Mexico in years to come, and will have much to say as to its destiny.

The injection of Rivera's name into the affair followed the popular belief that he engineered all murals, with hired hands executing some of them. The loss of their identity added to the ordeal of the two painters concerned. Their single attempt at correction follows:

To the Editor of *Excelsior*

Dear Sir:

As General Secretary of the Syndicate of Painters and Sculptors, I must make public the fact that the attacks levelled at our companion Diego Rivera, based on the partial destruction of the mural paintings of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria... are without any foundation whatsoever.

His paintings have not been damaged in the least. The paintings damaged by the students have no more in common with

the work of Diego Rivera than a similar social orientation and proletarian affinities. They were neither supervised by him nor painted in his style.

They are original works, executed and directed, some by José Clemente Orozco and others by David Alfaro Siqueiros, and personally entrusted to them by the Ministry of Public Education...

Because we believe it to be an act of justice, we ask you, Sr. Editor, to publish this statement.

For the Executive Committee
The General Secretary,
David A. Siqueiros.[6]

Asked for a statement, Rivera proved astonishingly cool to the plight of his comrades:

"The reporters of the metropolitan press were hoaxed by the news that a group of students of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria exercised direct action against the frescoes that I painted in the Auditorium of the school, commissioned by Secretary Vasconcelos. There is no truth in it. None of my works has been mutilated or stoned by a student mob. All are intact, a fact that may be verified by the public at any time."

"But what is the truth then, concerning the student riot that occurred only a few days ago?"

"Indeed a riot took place, or rather a tiny scandal. It seems that the boys partly destroyed a fresco painted by some other artist."

"But then," we said, "what may well have happened is that this mob acted in the mistaken belief that the destroyed fresco was yours."

Benevolent Diego Rivera stated his belief that the students never thought of destroying his works, though a few among them may prove open to the suggestions of his personal enemies.[7]

6. Ibid., July 12, 1924.
7. *El Universal Gráfico*, June 30, 1924.

On June 30 Rivera dismissed the destruction of the Preparatoria frescoes as "a tiny scandal," and its report as a hoax. On July 2, however, he signed, together with Siqueiros and Guerrero, the following protest:

> The Syndicate of Painters and Sculptors Protests the Damage to the Paintings that Decorate the Walls of the Preparatoria.
>
> We do not hold as solely responsible the students who ... planned to destroy our mural paintings and who seriously damaged of late the original works being executed in the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria by the painters José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. The true culprits are reactionary teachers... puritanical aristocrats, who burrow within the educational system, plotting to poison our youth. They are the rich and their breed, who intrigue against all that comes from the people and is of use to the people ... the reactionary press that shields them, the irresponsible revolutionaries who do not realize that their lack of affinity with revolutionary painting discloses within them a percentage of the bourgeois still rampant....
>
> We publicly warn pseudo students and reactionary teachers alike that we intend to make retaliation, by force if need be. ... As to the professors, undercover enemies of our labors, let them know they will be paid "eye for eye and tooth for tooth."
>
> The General Secretary David Alfaro Siqueiros
> The First Chairman Diego Rivera
> The Second Chairman Xavier Guerrero.[8]

This discrepancy in point of view is explained in another Syndicate release: "It is not true that Comrade Diego Rivera either initiated or inspired the protest released by our group. Following the bylaws of our Syndicate like any other member, he bowed to the will of the majority and signed it in his capacity of First Chairman, though not in agreement with some of its points."[9]

8. Released on July 2, 1924.
9. *Excelsior*, July 12, 1924.

The force of Rivera's objections to siding with the painters under attack is disclosed in *El Machete* of September 11: "Diego Rivera resigned from the Syndicate of Painters and Sculptors in July because of a difference of opinion concerning a majority decision relating to the protest made public at that time against the destruction of mural paintings in the National Preparatoria School."

Rivera's chances of finding work with the incoming government were materially increased as he disentangled his fate from that of the sinking Syndicate. The delicate task of keeping his fortunes afloat he entrusted to Salvador Novo, a young poet and one of his intimates. So finely timed that it was published on the same day that Vasconcelos left, the argument drew a fine distinction between the master and the plebs:

> DIEGO RIVERA AND HIS FOLLOWERS
> Footnote to a Pictorial Incident
>
> The students of the Preparatoria School have resorted to direct action against the paintings on its walls, having first tried their hand on the picturesque and futuristic display of a notorious tooth-puller. Both pranks have been well received by the people at large, who see in them a promise that the prestige of M.D. degrees will be upheld and the sign of a return to true beauty in imitation of nature. Brows have been lifted as the Secretary of Education, under whose patronage these paintings were perpetrated, ordered that, given the disastrous incidents, painting should stop and what is already done be covered with whitewash.
>
> ...He [Vasconcelos] commissioned the undeniable genius of Diego Rivera for the decoration of certain official walls. Nobody with eyes and soul may deny the beauty of works such as the Auditorium... No understanding person can state that ever before in Mexico walls were painted with such mastery or with as sublime a subject matter...
>
> But I must now speak of his disciples... Diego Rivera was soon surrounded by followers who discovered that his vulnerable spots were socialism and distortion... Through his intercession,

> they received from the authorities permission to decorate walls, for example those of the Preparatoria School.... They began decently enough ... at the top of the main staircase with a gingerbread procession and the battle of Otumba... But the lower they got, the higher grew their anarchistic rage. The more they were told that what they painted was ugly, the uglier they would paint. The more they were branded as Bolsheviks, the more allegorical became their pictures. They started downstairs with some so-called men adorned with muscles as obvious as those of anatomical charts. The androgyne that Diego Rivera had painted in the Auditorium was rehashed by his disciples as a Sun or some creative force... Incapable of invention, they duplicated it in all shapes, even headside down, but always stretching forth its powerful arms. They painted repulsive pictures, aiming to awaken in the spectator, instead of aesthetic emotions, an anarchistic fury if he is penniless, or, if wealthy, to make his knees buckle with fright...
>
> The poor adolescents of the Preparatoria do not go there to loiter but to study, and how are they to do that, lost among tumbrel loads of macabre art? To cater to our human frailty, science needs no more than a laboratory with white walls. Let then the disdain of our numerous mural geniuses fall on our future lawyers and bourgeois. The Secretary of Public Education and Fine Arts will take into account the youth, the inexperience, and the need for optical peace that is the lot of the students of the Preparatoria, who also are his wards.[10]

This piece of special pleading was an attempt at bargaining with incoming authorities: Hide under whitewash all murals not painted by Rivera, but spare the master.

Meanwhile the painters sought redress for their wrongs from Dr. B. J. Gastelum:

> The delegates—Srs. José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Roberto R. Pérez—urged on the Subsecretary their belief that his intervention was a necessity...

10. "Diego Rivera," *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 3, 1924.

> Dr. Gastelum indicated that he would consider imprudent any action taken against the students of the Preparatoria, and that he would attempt to stop the destruction of mural painting by conciliatory means.[11]

What Dr. Gastelum had in mind when he mentioned conciliatory means soon became apparent:

> FUTURIST PAINTERS DISMISSED
>
> *El Universal* has published the news that the Ministry of Education intends to dismiss a number of painters on its payroll, to avoid, if possible, that lovers of beauty concentrate their wrath on the pictures of the Preparatoria School and those of the Ministry of Education.
>
> The Department of Fine Arts released yesterday the names of those dismissed.[12]

Among them were A. Siqueiros and José C. Orozco.

In August, a presidential decree suspended most mural work, in recognition of what was already a *de facto* situation. Perhaps in a repentant mood, some of the students of the Preparatoria offered, out of fairness, the pages of their own publication, *Eureka*, for a hearing of the muralists' point of view. As a result, my "Postscript to a Destruction of Frescoes" was published in August 1924:

> The murals of José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, even though unfinished and the painters still at work, have been stoned and mutilated by a group of students of the school on whose walls they are being frescoed. Newspapers and magazines have reported the event as if it were a jolly joke; the kick of the ass to the dying lion was given with fervor by a young poet whose connoisseurship is deficient enough to see in Orozco a follower of Diego Rivera. As artist and as adolescent, he could have used his energy in behalf of a more generous cause....
>
> What could the authorities do? What they did: stop the work

11. *El Demócrata*, July 3, 1924.
12. *El Universal*, July 16, 1924.

> in progress, punish the painters for having attempted to bring beauty to those who have no need for it. Those great works, unique of their kind in the art of today, may be hastily whitewashed, a monument to the feigned candor of those unjust judges. Will they beautify those walls by having their family photographs enlarged, to mirror and multiply, to the satisfaction of their sentimental bellies, the very image of their fruitless lives and their immortal mediocrity?

To complete the drubbing of the muralists who had worked in the Preparatoria School, a conscientious controller of accounts, discovering that they had not completed their job within the time allotted, ordered the painters to reimburse out of their own pockets what sums had been advanced by the State. Siqueiros was saved from debtor's prison or its modern equivalent only because his past record as a soldier of the Revolution weighed enough in his favor in the mind of the incoming President, General Calles, for the following to have been issued:

> Presidential Decree.
>
> The citizen David Alfaro Siqueiros shall be exempted from refunding the sum of 101.29 (one hundred and one pesos and twenty-nine centavos), balance owed on the amount advanced as honorarium for the painting of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria. Said work was stopped in obedience to a Presidential decree dated August, and the party stated that he was desirous of continuing the work.
>
> A copy of this decree will be sent to the National Treasury so that the respective cancellation be entered in the corresponding account.
>
> National Palace, Mexico City
> December 13th, 1924
> The President of the Republic
> P. Elias Calles[13]

13. Reprinted in *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*, 3, 1925.

After his dismissal, Siqueiros left the capital for Guadalajara where he was to mix mural painting with the organization of miners' unions. Orozco remained in his beloved Mexico City, having found a refuge in the editorial department of the Ministry of Education, gathered in by its director, his kind friend Julio Torri. Orozco's new job was to sit behind a draftsman's board and produce vignettes, chapter heads, and lettering for government publications.

With the painters dismissed, the unguarded murals of the Preparatoria disintegrated further, a process speeded up by the strict morals of the janitor of the school. What mottoes, devices, poems, and sketches were scratched over the frescoes by students were as a rule of doubtful propriety, and the janitor deemed it his duty to erase them by clipping out in each case a neat chunk of wall including the controversial graffito. In the two years that the murals were left undefended, they became pockmarked with countless neat white rectangles, as the puritanical janitor plied his trade.

CHAPTER 23

Exit Vasconcelos, Enter Puig

Vasconcelos' resignation became effective on July 3, 1924, and the next day the retiring Secretary was wished Godspeed in a cordial banquet given by the artists and writers he had helped.

> Maestro Carlos del Castillo rendered to perfection on the keyboard his "Love Gavotte." Its winged notes were heard with religious concentration by the audience.
>
> Don Diego Rivera, in the name of the painters present, gave thanks to "Joe" Vasconcelos for letting them work, "in spite of the imbeciles who surround him far and near." The personal allusion intended by the artist passed unnoticed in the cordial atmosphere of the gathering.[1]

Those present could hardly miss the speaker's intention, for at the words "... and near," Diego thrust a spatulate thumb over the tablecloth toward ancient Ezequiel Chávez, president of the university, who sat at Vasconcelos' right as his most distinguished well-wisher. The conservative old man was no friend of the muralists, his mildly worded but publicly expressed opinion of their works being that "these paintings are not beautiful."

The *Excelsior* editorialized:

> This smear was in the true style of Diego Rivera, the bad painter of ugly things ...
>
> The truculence of this official painter for the revolution should surprise no one. A man who paints as Don Diego does

1. *Excelsior*, July 5, 1924.

should express himself as Don Diego does. Anything else would be a paradox....

What an idea Sr. Gastelum has of discipline! Does he believe that ... an inferior such as Don Diego Rivera may insult in public a superior such as Don Ezequiel Chávez! And how can a functionary who tolerates such bad manners educate the youth of Mexico?[2]

Nemesio García Naranjo commented:

As Don Diego Rivera seems to take offense at the censures that his works provoke, one should warn him that such works have been made possible ... thanks to the hermetic and despotic dictatorship of a small literary group now in power ... As long as people live off the Budget, they are constrained by their stomachs ... to pay abject obeisance to the commands of the supreme court that rules over Beauty and Good Taste. And this supreme court has decreed that Diego Rivera is a genius.

Don Diego brands his detractors as imbeciles. Being unconditionally backed by official circles, it is easy for him to forget that the artist is not a judge, but one accused, and waiting in the dock for the final verdict of Her Majesty Posterity.

To win this appeal one has of course to be a genius. Geniuses do not require a government to launch them. They can do it singlehandedly.[3]

And thus closed the Vasconcelos era.

We have seen how a spark of Pythagorean methodology impelled the philosopher-politician to sponsor the plastic arts, starting Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, and many others on their mural careers, and slackening the cord that held Mexican art in abeyance to Europe. Yet this bureaucratic Columbus failed to realize the vastness of the vistas he had opened. All through his tenure of office Vasconcelos remained hemmed in between rabid public opinion and the scruples of his own metaphysically inclined conscience. At the time of his resignation he felt that the painters had got out of hand, had

2. Ibid., July 10, 1924.
3. "Imposiciones estéticas," *El Universal*, July 16, 1924.

refused to work along the line of pure art so fairly offered them, and, to use own terminology, instead of lifting the masses to the Pythagorean level of unhampered delectation had dragged painting willfully down to function as a Newtonian cog.

Always good at guessing the potential extent of official support, Rivera was quick to feel the weariness of our only patron:

> The ocean of stupidity is swelling.
>
> The literati and the plebs with professional diplomas weigh on the mind of one who, from his seat of power, promoted artists. He, wearying of the meows of pseudo critics, wishes no more obnoxious paintings.
>
> Times grow troublesome. One after another the scaffolds disappear.
>
> Immigrations.
>
> Triumph of bootlickers and princely lap dogs.
>
> Exultation of the eunuchs, mad capers of the academicians.[4]

The destruction of the frescoes of Orozco and Siqueiros was a true index of public opinion. The optimism of the enemies of the murals soared as the props of official protection were knocked from under the painters. And yet the members of the Syndicate went down fighting. The content of a Syndicate leaflet released on July 8, 1924, the text of which I could not locate, can be imagined from the answer of the Federation of Students:

> THE SCURRILOUS PAMPHLET OF A GROUP OF PAINTERS IS ANSWERED BY THE STUDENTS—BAD CARICATURES IS THE TERM WITH WHICH THEY BRAND THE PAINTINGS OF THE PREPARATORIA SCHOOL
>
> In a lampoon published yesterday, a group of painters hopes to extricate itself from the just criticisms that the paintings of the Preparatoria School receive. Casting away the most elementary lessons of honor and decorum, they fill the whole sheet with vile aspersions on the persons of the President of the University, respectable ladies, our colleagues from the Preparatoria School, and other personages of known intellectual worth ...

4. "Dos Años," *Azulejos*, Dec. 1923.

> The Federation of Students of Mexico protests publicly and manfully against such ill-mannered aspersions on Honor, Dignity, Education, and, in short, Civilization ...
>
> The Federation of Students of Mexico begs Society to reject the defamations to which our companions of the Preparatoria have been subjected, and to realize that they acted in behalf of everybody's feelings. To grant that in certain cases their actions were tinged with the turbulence that befits youth does not impugn their just motives.[5]

Of the Syndicate members only Rivera managed to safely bridge the change of Secretaries. When the change came, he was at work in the staircase of the Ministry. The subject matter of this complex work was graded along the ascending wall to match the vertical ascent of the Mexican land itself from sea level to the top of the volcanoes.

The spiraled panorama opened at sea level. On the right wall, which flanks the entrance, Diego painted a scene illustrating man's submarine activities: helmeted pearl-divers and the boat from which they plunge. He indulged there in one of the few subjective notes to be found in this monument of didactic painting, one that reflects his bitterness at the prevalent political uncertainty. Along the prow, as if it were the boat's name, Rivera wrote in a small cursive hand: "Margaritas ante porcos."

Next came the sea islands, with neoclassical females strangely reminiscent of Puvis de Chavannes' "Vision Antique." One entered the diagonal of the stairs with scenes of Tehuantepec, bathers, and a boar hunter. In a jungle, of which the *cueva* of the auditorium was the prototype, sat Xochipilli, God of Flowers, a loan, as it were, from the National Museum of Archaeology; higher up was a hacienda scene with the boss lolling in a hammock while women toiled. A peon sharpened his machete on a stone,

> To kill snakes, end strife,
> And humble the pride of the impious rich.

as the refrain went.

5. *Excelsior*, July 10, 1924.

While Heaven's fire was seen as destroying the enemies of Rivera's ideal order, the pre-Hispanic note was again struck with an Indian woman in the local dress of the mountain villages, hieratically posed with young corn in her hands as if she were Centeotl, Aztec goddess of agriculture. Further on, worker, soldier, and peasant clasped hands in a world made better by white-robed scientists and school teachers.

The last panel of the ensemble, and the last to be painted, grouped together Rivera as the architect, Martínez Pintao as the sculptor, and the painter, a muralist sitting on a scaffold, turning his back on the spectator. Diego assured me, and I would like to believe it, that the muralist was myself.

The dramatic self-portrait is painted with utmost care. Its moody expression matched Rivera's frame of mind while waiting for the incoming Secretary to pronounce himself on the future of the murals. Stylistically it blends north and south of the Rio Grande, for it owes as much to the lens of Edward Weston as to the painter's brush (Figs. 47a, 47b). In his unpublished "Day Book" Edward referred to the sittings:

> November 15, 1924: Jean and I visited Diego's new murals on the walls of the Secretaría stairway—quite the finest of his work. Luxuriant, tropical, complex, yet in the last analysis a conception simple and powerful: a great piece of work.
>
> November 24: Sunday in the "Secretaría" patio I made two dozen Graflex negatives of Diego Rivera ... Some there are who feel that Diego's work is too calculated, too entirely a product of his brain. For me it is emotional as well as intellectual. For a man to paint murals twelve hours a day—sometimes even sixteen hours at a stretch—and day after day working quite as a day-laborer might, not awaiting "mood" or "inspiration," it is amazing to me how much feeling he attains in his work ... Yesterday I felt as I have before the preoccupation of his work. Direct questions were often unheard, his eyes would be utterly oblivious to surroundings—then suddenly he would start out of himself, break into a bored, genial smile, and for a few moments Diego the dreamer was gone.

Soon after the riots at the Preparatoria, students of the school found out that the destruction had not inconvenienced their purported target, Rivera, in the least. The sufferers were others, Siqueiros, Orozco, whose names many were then learning for the first time. The next incident in the adolescents' crusade for beauty quickly justified the meaning of the Latin adage with which Rivera had expressed his brooding on the pearl-divers panel:

> A Rivera fresco attacked....
>
> One of the murals painted by the controversial artist Diego de Rivera... was defaced yesterday. It had been painted less than a week ago.
>
> A bayadera—stylized of course—resting in a native hammock from the exertion of the dance, suffered indignities. Her tropical costume was torn apart in such a way that the Ministry ordered the stairway closed to traffic while the artist mends his work.
>
> It is rumored that the destruction, far from being an isolated attempt, is the first endeavor of a group that plans a systematic campaign against Rivera's frescoes.[6]

Though Rivera was not one of them any longer, the members of the Syndicate with selfless comradeship rushed to the rescue in a "Protest of the Syndicate Against New Profanations of Mural Paintings." The postscript read:

> Diego Rivera resigned from the Syndicate of Painters and Sculptors in July ... Notwithstanding, given our solidarity within the same craft, we believe that it is our uneludible duty to defend his aesthetico-social work, which represents a substantial value in our collective labor, of which it is a part and out of which it grew.[7]

I believe this to have been the last public expression of the Syndicate. Its members, now out of jobs, scattered soon after in search of a living.

6. *El Universal*, Sept. 5, 1924.
7. Published in *El Machete*, No. 13, Sept. 11–18, 1924.

Following the defacements, timorous Sr. Gastelum did not take it upon himself to stop the decoration of the Ministry, as that of the Preparatoria School had been stopped. His term as acting Secretary would be over in December, when the incoming President would pick his cabinet. Gastelum left the dismissal of Rivera to the future Secretary, should he feel so inclined.

When General Calles became President, he gave the portfolio of Education to Dr. J. M. Puig Casauranc, who inherited as well the imposing setting conceived by his predecessor, and ensconced himself behind the table that was Vasconcelos' pride—ornamented with the signs of the zodiac carved in hard *zapote* wood. Besides the sturdy furniture, Puig did receive a most embarassing wealth of frescoes solidly embedded in the walls of his Ministry. Though the stage had by now been artfully cleared of minor characters, there still remained the patient plodding bulk of Diego Rivera barring the stairs with his elaborate scaffold and already sending his masons into the second court as scouts to prepare the walls with a view to the painting of more frescoes.

Public opinion poised a bucket of whitewash over the Ministry murals, and waited expectantly to see how Puig would get rid of the painter as well. Alvaro Pruneda unsympathetically described the fateful first meeting of Rivera with the new Secretary.

> A few days ago, close to the twilight hour, accompanied by Diego Rivera and a gentleman who writes verses, the Secretary of Education graciously consented to be the first to gaze at the paintings that adorn the walls of one of the staircases of his own Ministry.
>
> With an amiability that bordered on protocol, Rivera explained to Dr. Puig the meaning of his frescoes ... Rivera seemed to suffer acutely, and to miss in the new Secretary the inspiring generosity of Sr. Vasconcelos. He appeared to sense how his efforts at persuasion were going to waste ... I fancy that at that moment he felt an icy breeze of defeat pass by ...
>
> May Rivera realize that it is better to do little and well, rather than to do those immense walls at 40 pesos per square yard, and

better to be an average landscape painter than a misfit. As I emerged from this sickening place a friend hailed me: "Have you seen Diego's work? I think it starts here." I answered, "No, my friend, it ends here."[8]

The ill-wisher guessed wrong. The same climatic incident in Rivera's mural career is recorded by another witness, a friendly one this time, José D. Frias, the one witness referred to by Pruneda as the "gentleman who writes verses":

Two or three days after Dr. Puig had taken office, I went with him, the artist, the lawyer, Enrique Jiménez, and others to hear a commentary on the frescoes that were nearing completion on the main stairway of the Ministry ... Still convalescing from the grippe, the artist had just left his bed and his features were strained with the same weariness caught in the self-portrait at the top of the stairway...

The Secretary said, "All things considered, we are not empowered to pass judgment; we must let future generations give a final judgment."

And later in the car, he added, "Rivera is the philosopher of the brush."[9]

How much better those anodyne comments than the expected drastic rebuff! As a result, this article is joyfully dedicated by the painter's friend "To Dr. J. M. Puig Casauranc, who has recognized the worth of Rivera's paintings."

Not only did Puig keep Rivera at his work, thus assuring him the few more years he needed to finish the decoration of the Ministry, but he also published for all to read some "Brief commentaries" on the panels of the first court, in which he developed his thought that "Rivera is the philosopher of the brush." Two samples will suffice to prove Puig's conversion to the new aesthetic:

"Embrace of Worker and Peasant."

Peasant and worker embrace. They have conquered, they have crossed the hard bridge of anguish and bitterness. They go

8. *El Universal Ilustrado*, March 5, 1925.
9. Ibid., Feb. 19, 1925.

toward the new life of the city of the future, which will be a refuge against suffering and evil.

"Entrance to the Mine."

Christ on Calvary at least had the light that shone on the brutal tragedy. Farm hands feel the caress of the sun that transmutes the scythe into silver. But the modern Christs carry their crosses into a torturing, atrocious darkness.[10]

Now reassured as to the future of his job, Rivera repainted the pearl-divers' boat, erasing the Latin proverb as he had once before deleted the Gutiérrez Cruz poem, but this time on his own initiative.

So real was Dr. Puig's liking for murals that he commissioned some for the handsome house that he built soon after coming into power. The muralist of his choice was Máximo Pacheco, who in his early teens had been a helper to Revueltas and Alva, and whose admirable drawings remain among the best that the period produced (Fig. 48). When Puig invited Pacheco to decorate his walls, the Indian boy had already painted murals of his own in a public school and was prepared to use the same theme again, a touching story of a poor crippled student hazed by nasty healthy little rich boys. The naïveté of carrying revolutionary political declamation to the kindergarten age would have proved awkward in Puig's own secluded, carpeted home. Puzzled, Pacheco told me at the time how the Secretary had asked him to represent instead a poor little boy and a rich little boy going to school hand in hand—that would look much nicer, he said.

While Vasconcelos was in power, surrounded by artist-courtiers, flattery, or rather recognition of his substantial help, was the rule. Flattering allusions to the Maecenas are found in the murals of the period. In his fresco "The Feast of the Cross" Montenegro ushered in Vasconcelos as the banner holder of the university. Rivera's Tehuantepec series of frescoes in the first court of the Ministry were in homage to the birthplace of the Secretary, and the artist gratefully dedicated a water-color study used for its first panel "To José Vasconcelos, thanks to whom I can work."

10. Ibid., March 26, 1925.

At the end of 1924 dethroned Vasconcelos turned to newspaper writing for a living and did not spare his successor the rod in his political articles. The only two painters who had safely bridged the change of regime were Montenegro and Rivera, and both were now called upon to prove their fealty to their new employer, Dr. Puig. Both readily obliged: Montenegro destroyed the portrait of Vasconcelos featured in "The Feast of the Cross," replacing it by a politically neutral female in floating drapes. Not to be left behind, Rivera represented Vasconcelos in a panel of the Ministry that Vasconcelos himself had built as a dwarf comically straddling a white elephant, dipping his pen in a spittoon.

Such hard-boiled practicality proves that the pioneering, heroic period of mural painting was closed. In the second court of the Ministry a steady betterment of the fresco technique, an increasingly complex planning, was to replace the first breath of inspiration. The later works show a maturity in the handling of technical problems and problems of propaganda that is in sharp contrast to the flounderings and stutterings that mark Rivera's first encaustic and his first frescoes.

The present consensus is that the later murals are weaker in creativeness than the early ones, but we must take into account the fact that the critics of our period are naturally keyed to an appreciation of this introverted, disorderly quality that we lavishly call genius, and favor autographic scribblings, shorthand sketches, and color notes. A future generation of critics, more objectively minded, may decide that, after 1924, the great quality of Rivera's output was precisely its articulate thinking and rational approach, on a scale equaling the conscientious output of such grand mural contractors as Vasari and LeBrun.

CHAPTER 24

Renaissance in Guadalajara

After 1924, and as a result of the forced exodus of young artists from Mexico City, it was in provincial Jalisco that murals were executed, equaling in purity and élan those of the earlier period. It was there also, not in the capital, that the first successful communal painting was actually realized.

The State of Jalisco and its capital, Guadalajara, contributed as much art and as many artists to the mural renaissance as Mexico City. Born *tapatios* were Dr. Atl, Amado de la Cueva, Jorge Enciso, Roberto Montenegro, José Clemente Orozco, Carlos Orozco Romero. Xavier Guerrero came to live in Jalisco when he was so young that he also was accepted as a tapatio.

In about 1900 the older men—Enciso, Atl, Montenegro—had grouped around Félix Bernadelli, painter, musician, and preëminently a teacher. A decade later, the next generation of artists met, chatted, and dined in a club house that provincial gossip dubbed "El Centro Bohemio." Future governor Zuno and future museum founder Ixca were among its charter members, together with the future muralists Guerrero, de la Cueva, and Orozco Romero. This easygoing and rather loose-jointed society probably did as much spadework to bring forth the Mexican renaissance as did the severe and hallowed Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City.

Both institutions were typical of the regions they represented. To tapatios the capital appeared grim and its dwellers inhibited and overtly practical. In Guadalajara the business of living was gracious and a game. Colonial buildings, with holy statues in niches at street corners, conjured up musketeers' blades crossed in the moonlight;

love was easy, as all women were beautiful; even revolutions were rather evolutions performed to the beat of a light opera score.

Xavier Guerrero's art training, begun in Chihuahua along lines of technical thoroughness, took on a lighter quality as soon as he reached Guadalajara. Though he was then only fifteen, he well remembers his tapatio beginnings: At the time, Don Segundo, a rich milkman, was building and decorating to his own fancy a house that came to be known, given the source of his fortune, as the House of the Cows. One day loitering little Xavier said to the master house painter, "I am a painter too." Said the master house painter, without slackening the swish of his brush, "Well, put a river here." Said Xavier, "I will, and with a sky too," and did. Said the master painter, "Good, now put rocks here," which he did. That done, "Put a child by the river." That done, "Make him cry."

Once his talent was proved, Xavier rated a scaffold of his own. He milked the milkman for all he was worth, selling him on the idea of a Renaissance frieze, hand-stenciled at so much per yard, full of people who ended in fishtails, a feature that greatly surprised Don Segundo.

Xavier also tells of how, during the Revolution, he was transformed into a tapatio warrior:

> I was asked to paint a mural in a hacienda, that is, to paint a new map of the grounds to replace one that had become obsolete. What good meals they served there, large pitchers of creamy milk, and two desserts to choose from! But it did not last. Along came a troop of armed men and invited us outside to witness the shooting of hacienda men. When he saw me, the chief said, "You will be my secretary. Get us some medicines." Naturally I agreed, "I can get some at Chapala."
>
> They gave me a huge white horse and I galloped at the head of the troop, and because I knew most of the people in town, I took my cavalcade all through the main street to the outskirts and back again. And people gasped and said, "We didn't know that you had been promoted to general!"

One of the local men who took a leading part in the Revolution

was Guadalupe Zuno, a painter in his own right and a friend of the artists. He was rewarded for his political and military stand with the governorship of the state, and this at the time when the mural renaissance was getting into its stride. He invited his painter friends to see him sworn into office, financing the trip for those who were not at hand.

I arrived with the contingent that left Mexico City on February 26, 1923. Though few in number, we were a conspicuous lot, a handful of civilians in a sea of uniformed politicos. Nonetheless, or perhaps because of this, we acted fierce: the sculptor Nacho Asúnsolo, not entirely sober, held up our fellow passengers with a substantial pistol "that my General Obregón gave me with his own hand." One should, however, ascribe the feat of cowing a carload of sharpshooting generals into submission to the political magic associated with the weapon rather than to its owner's momentarily erratic aim. Feeling pushed into the background for once and brooding at a car window, Rivera made a weak bid for public attention by shooting a ragged hole through one of his own sleeves, boldly claiming it as proof of a murderous attack.

On arrival we joined a cockfight party at a neighboring hacienda. To enliven the entr'actes, casual shots were fired at the shoes of the few civilians in sight—to make them dance—a kind of exercise I indulged in grudgingly. Of the main diversion, I remember with what loving care the mustachioed owners handled the lean fighters; the pinwheel of feathers shot out of the fluff of an action too quick to be seen—the dead, no less impressive in death for their minute size.

Later in the day, art-loving ladies had scheduled a cultural party for us in the conventual courts of the State Museum. To the dismay of our genteel hostesses, far from subsiding at the sight of tea and cake, the artist guests chose instead to shoot out the few electric bulbs hung over the gloomy vastness of the colonial patio.

Ixca Farías, epicure founder of the Museum—where obsolete furniture, modern paintings, and assassins' desiccated arms mingled democratically—deciding that the visitors had better lie where they stood, rose to the occasion with philosophical courtesy and tucked us in various historical beds interspersed with army cots. As sleep

was slow to come, we repaid Ixca's unstinting hospitality in a dubious way: fired with gratitude and knowing how great his love was for his museum, we decided to pool our knowledge of art and rid the establishment of whatever exhibits fell below our exacting standards. Revueltas was particularly zealous, being the first to indict the objects that offended his good taste. The debris kept mounting.

There must have been sharp disagreement among the overtaxed jurymen, for we awoke next day with varying degrees of bumps and bruises. Siqueiros was particularly indignant when, looking in a mirror, he spied a trench dug in the middle of his forehead; his suspicions focused on a bloody medieval halberd that unaccountably lay in bed with me.

Most Jalisco artists do leave the state early, eager to try their luck in the capital. Prominent among those who chose to stay and work in Guadalajara was Carlos Orozco Romero. According to his friend Ixca Farías: "He manifested artistic leanings at an early age. Don Jesús Orozco, his father, meant to train him to become a tailor and gave him lessons in cloth cutting; the child showed his artistic temperament by becoming a cutter superior to his father."[1] Instead of feeling jealousy at this turn of events, father Orozco encouraged his gifted child. Says Carlos: "Father would tell me, 'Here is ten cents. Go get me a landscape that I saw at such and such a spot.' I would ride the streetcar to the spot father had described, open my watercolor box, try, come back saying, 'Father, I cannot bring that landscape back.' He would answer, 'Do not feel bad; here is another ten cents.' And this time I would get it."

In 1921 Basilio Vadillo, governor of his native state, subsidized the painter so that he might go to Europe. The decree, dated May 31, provided a thousand pesos for traveling expenses and a monthly allowance of one hundred and fifty pesos for one year. In Madrid Carlos joined his fellow tapatio, Amado de la Cueva, another Vadillo protégé, and both showed their work at the Madrid Autumn Salon of 1921.

After a side trip to France, Carlos Orozco Romero returned to

1. *Biografía de Pintores Jalisciense*s, 1882–1940 (Guadalajara, Ricardo Delgado, 1940), p. 37.

Mexico, where exciting things were beginning to happen in the field of art. Back in Guadalajara, the encaustic mural that he painted in one of the patios of the State Museum was the first modern mural executed outside of Mexico City (Fig. 49). Orozco Romero thus joined the unhappy company of the suffering Dieguitos. The mural earned for its maker the same derision and criticism that had been the lot of other young painters. A local critic described it in an unusually friendly tone:

> It is totally of Jalisco, and in it are people that I fancy I have seen while passing through a village: the potters, the Indian girls framed by windows laden with potted tulips. One of the best among the young writers of Jalisco accuses Orozco of losing his personality to that of Diego Rivera, of floundering; he states that the mural work of the artist reminds one too much of that of the master.[2]

Even in this review, which blows both hot and cold, one feels how the work differed from that done in the capital. It captured the peculiarly gracious quality of provincial Guadalajara with a strictly local subject, the Indian potters of nearby Tonalá. Unlike the sturdy, often heavy mural products of Mexico City, with closed fists and expounding index fingers to match the grime of the restless capital, Orozco Romero's work reflected the *mudéjar* loveliness of its calm surroundings.

Later on, when the State Museum corrected its easy rambling ways, the work of Orozco Romero, despite its artistic and historical value, was mercilessly whitewashed for the sake of architectural purity.

Also born a tapatio was another painter, Amado de la Cueva, who, in Mexico City, worked with me and Xavier Guerrero in the second court of the Ministry of Education. Said Xavier, himself a copper-hued Indian, reminiscing on their adolescence:

> In Guadalajara, Amado and I lived together. Amado was very dark, with dark hair, black suit, black shirt, black tie, and, be-

2. *El Universal Ilustrado*, Nov. 1, 1923.

cause at the time he had a skin itch on his hands, black gloves. We would sit together on park benches, saying nothing, and street urchins would gather and wonder. They decided that Amado was the devil, I his retainer, and swore to unmask us.

We both went to medical school to practice autopsies. Cadavers were rare then, more so than now, and if there was a good accident, resulting in the death of some healthy driver or *cargador,* the school janitor would amicably drop a rush note at our apartment.

One day we went bathing in the lake, leaving our clothes on the beach. The waifs followed us and frisked our pockets while we were swimming. In Amado's coat they found the note, "Amado, hoy hay cadaver" or "Beloved, there is a corpse today." Now they were certain.

At the end of 1923, following the forced disbanding of the team that had attempted to paint the second court of the Ministry, Amado de la Cueva returned to Guadalajara, where fellow "Bohemian" Zuno, now state governor, gave him the post of state librarian. I visited Amado at his job, surrounded by parchment-bound folios that, as he handled them, seemed to match his peculiarly beautiful hands, strong-knuckled and lean-fingered. Sometime in 1924 Amado returned to mural painting in order to decorate the Palacio de Gobernación.

A contemporaneous description records that Amado de la Cueva "has painted two portraits: Hernan Cortez and Nuño de Guzmán. Richly drawn, they show a great mastery of the difficult fresco medium ... There is also a great figure of Saint Christopher ... painted in the tradition of the barbaric artists of the time of the Conquest: strong, big, dominating, well able to lift on his wide shoulders the God Child (Fig. 50a).[3] These three frescoes are now destroyed.

At the end of 1924 the stoppage of the work at the Preparatoria School sent a jobless Siqueiros back to join Amado. Elated at the potential cultural gain for his state, Governor Zuno gave both

3. Clipping lent by Carlos Orozco Romero. Guadalupe Zuno, "La Pintura Mural," *Bandera de Provincias,* undated.

painters a joint commission to decorate the walls of the large former chapel attached to the old university (Figs. 50b, 50c).

Amado planned the work, and Siqueiros joined his friend as a helper. This purposeful humility in strong-willed, strong-fisted Siqueiros shows how sincere his belief was in the unimportance of the individual and his faith in the validity of a communal art. Thus was launched a second attempt at erecting the modern cathedral, envisaged as an anonymous venture similar to the medieval one. Unlike what had happened in the second court of the Ministry, the painters, unhampered this time by outside pressure, saw the work through to completion.

Anita Brenner visited the team at their work. She noted in her diary:

> Guadalajara, March 15, 1926: Done in red and on a single plane highly simplified. It is decoration, that is all, and to conform to Amado's ideas of painting not breaking the architecture as it does when there is perspective. He and Siqueiros have formulated a style plastically and ideologically unified.
>
> March 25: Siqueiros himself distrusts them and says he considers them mediocre... Amado is intellectual, too intellectual, and he is practically responsible for these things. Siqueiros says that in nearly everything he has worked merely as a laborer. But from what I can see there is a little more than that.

As governor, Zuno had commissioned the work; himself a modern painter, he approved of his colleagues' boldness. To reconcile his constituents with the finished work, Governor Zuno also turned art critic:

> De la Cueva and Alfaro faced a difficult problem. The hall has high narrow walls, planned in the shape of a cross. Of robust proportions, the arc of the vault reposes on an area twice its radius in height ...
>
> At first sight one confuses the work done by the two painters, but close observation clearly reveals the figures done by Alfaro, angular, reconstructed, more ample than those of Amado.

> Over the main entrance the latter has represented the agrarian leader Zapata, flanked by a guard of two grandly designed peasants who tilt their tilling implements on a diagonal, while their chieftain Zapata rests his rifle plumb over the center of the arch.
>
> Isolated, unrelated symbols of the sun, the clouds, corn, like those that folk painters affect in their woodcuts and miraculous *retablos*... Symbols multiply on the lateral walls, furnaces, rains, tempests, wheat chaff, corn cobs, dams, furrows. Over these symbols stand men of the people: agrarians, miners, potters, syndicalists, weavers, mechanics....
>
> Worthy of praise is the capacity shown by these two young men to work in mutual coordination, to subject their personal styles to a central formula ... a responsibility they never ceased to feel.[4]

The strong decisions that were taken to ensure unity despite the variety of hands also touched upon important problems of style. Our earlier pre-Hispanic borrowings suffered from a pictorial obeisance to Renaissance tenets, and especially to those of Italian perspective, space-creating and surface-denying. When Rivera represented squatting figures he intended to absorb the peculiar proportions found in Aztec codices, but the post-Renaissance factors—soft modelings learned from Renoir and a fullness of spatial landscaping —minimized or neutralized the archaic intent. To avoid such a clash of means, Amado bravely returned to pre-Hispanic spatial and perspective conventions. Amado used painted objects as a kind of pictorial alphabet, to be mentally rearranged into syllables, words, and phrases. He did not represent a man making a Marxist preachment, with fist raised and mouth open. Instead, the very text of the discourse is read on the wall, the Aztec glyph being replaced by a modern equivalent, and the paper of maguey fiber by the more permanent mortar.

Fearless repetitions of terms, optical litanies of sickles and guns, corn and plows, remind one of the similarly lengthy accounts of gold nuggets, quetzal plumes, sacks of grain, slaves, that in colonial

4. Ibid.

codices signify the tributes paid by each Indian village to the Spanish Crown, impersonated by a velvet-cloaked knight lolling in a senatorial chair. But what was once stated in servility was now restated in freedom. Now Zapata was lord, and the visual counts of machines and plows were in the way of being a triumphant inventory of what tools the Revolution had put in the hands of peasants and workers.

The work was finished in March 1926, and the last of the high scaffolds came down on April first. Amado and his painter-helper, Roberto Reyes Pérez, chose to celebrate by taking a motorcycle ride, with Amado driving. According to *El Informador,* Guadalajara, on April 2:

> The young painter Amado de la Cueva died yesterday... While riding his motorcycle in the center of town he collided with an automobile and suffered frightful contusions... The tremendous impact threw Amado and his companion clear of the machine, which turned over with its motor still running... Alas, the type and strength of the blow—for it is believed that Amado received the handles in the abdomen—made all efforts useless. Amado lived a few more hours, dying that same night.

Back in Mexico City, Anita Brenner learned of the news:

> April 7, 1926: I see him in overalls working on those drawings, in smoke grey on the motorcycle, teeth gleaming. He would end that way. Smashed to pieces on the rocks with his motorcycle. Curve and a crash and there would be nothing half way about it. Strident and live, and smashed blood and bone and kinky black hair on wheels, and his teeth. If he had grown old, he might have grown weak...
>
> Smoke grey on a grey red motorcycle, crashing through the religious streets of Guadalajara, and making the *novios* at the windows squeeze close to the wall. Dry small hands and a monkey body. Gargantuan laugh and rabelaisian contribution to conversation, and compass in hand making theories about mural decoration. The only thing he got emotional about in talk was painting. Start him off and he would figure and curse on forever.

On the spur of the news, an American friend wrote the following:

AMADO KILLED ON HIS MOTORCYCLE

APRIL, 1926

Amado, they called him; Beloved,
The Black Devil, whose black
Was a toast to the steel which begot him,
Called him beloved, and took him back.
The brown earth bore him,
Brown, and branded him, being young,
With a passion.
The tufted hills, glass and woman
Saw him pass, grey and acrid,
His hungry strident heart swift and acid,
Hurtling direct through life
Blood and laughter flecked and flying...
And we who loved him crying.

Throughout his short career, Amado de la Cueva brought to a movement that was both loud-spoken and violent a useful sense of balance and discretion. His learning never took the form of eclecticism. Concise and delicately felt is Carlos Orozco Romero's summing up of Amado's career, published at the time of his death: "His paintings and drawings were worked with conscience and with a great simplicity proper to great works full of volume and expression. All that he did has the marks of the good workmanship to which, with real tenderness, he devoted his last days of life... An essential purity of proportions is not understood by all."[5]

Amado's death marks the nadir of the initial upsurge of Mexican murals, which alone is the subject matter of this book. After their dismissal from the Ministry and the Preparatoria, the muralists went through lean times. Orozco found private employment with Don Francisco Iturbe, owner of the Casa de los Azulejos. As heartily as he did anything, Siqueiros switched to organizing and disorganizing labor unions. I lived a while with a small job as draftsman for

5. "Amado de la Cueva y su obra," *Arte y Artistas*, clipping undated.

the Department of Publications of the Ministry, the same place where Orozco, in his premural days, had found asylum. With no more walls to fresco, the young muralists tried their hand at another and very different craft, that of easel painting. The good muscles of elbow and shoulder called upon to cover large surfaces fell inactive, while those of wrist and fingers were taught to work.

Of the group, only Rivera continued to paint murals unperturbed, considered the official painter to a revolution grown increasingly impatient of revolutions.

CHAPTER 25

Conclusion

This book touches upon many matters, some of which are foreign to most treatises on art but are nevertheless relevant here. The kind of painting that we did in the twenties was never meant as pure painting, and art for art is decidedly not the term we would have favored to describe our activities. To paint in Mexico is not the same as to paint in Paris or New York. The non-Greek nature of the Amerindian cultural subsoil, the planting of the Cross in the New World a thousand years after its recovery by Saint Helena, the bivalency of the race, the hot revolutionary breath of 1910 that tumbled ivory towers as drastically as the wolf blew away the house of straw—all were bound to qualify the Mexican work.

Yet in spite of, or because of, this localized element, the mural movement has proved its international validity. Even while the first frescoes were in the making, art lovers prophesied little future for our art. In the twenties the worth of a style so obviously at odds with that of the School of Paris was seriously doubted. Well-meaning travelers urged us to subscribe to international art magazines, as an aid to reform. In the thirties, with the depression a blatantly novel ingredient added to American standards, the cruel unbalance of the Mexican episodes acquired meaning over the border. This accolade by the masses fortified critics in their modest estimate of the proportion of true art in Mexican art. Lionello Venturi became their mouthpiece in his *Art Criticism Now*, published in 1941:

> It was further unfortunate that in this country [the United States] the vogue for murals was started by Mexican painters

> like Rivera and Orozco, both academicians. They introduced a rather mechanical form and a social content, both foreign to art.
>
> The tradition of modern art dates back to about eighty years ago; since then the prevailing interest has been the study of form. This study may be symbolized by the picture of apples... If you compel a painter to fill some hundreds of square feet of wall space with hundreds of figures, he cannot find his form as he did after considerable study of a simple apple... This is no longer a way to art.

Today it is the critic's analysis of modern art that seems amazingly obsolete. Cézanne's apple is no longer a sure touchstone. Since Venturi wrote, other art modes and fashions have sprouted and bloomed ever further away from "the study of form." At times Mexican art and art fashions have coincided. Orozco's and Siqueiros' distortions pleased a generation that hoped for an infusion of fresh blood from Amerindian and Pacific arts. The present generation, intent on a new humanism, goes deep into the concept of man that justified these distortions.

A re-estimate of Rivera may be next, as the anecdotes he so dutifully wove into his murals lose in topical value and, therefore, in interest. When looking at Lorenzetti's frescoes, few care who were the villains and who the heroes in Sienese politics five hundred years ago. Yet Lorenzetti is alive as ever. Rivera's work, as it is drained of its journalistic meaning, may acquire added stylistic meaning and dignity for generations to come who again will esteem a didactic approach.

Unique as Mexican art appears in the contemporary picture, this uniqueness is true only of the moment. Once Europe held a similar viewpoint. Mosaics and frescoes spread their arras over the walls of basilicas and country shrines. Figures of heroes, saints, and angels filled surfaces hundreds of feet square. Perhaps critics grumbled, but the people liked it, savoring the painted processionals as if they were illuminations out of some giant Bible.

In their attempt to restore a more objective validity to painting than that of mood, the Mexicans re-enacted on the mural

scale yet another period of art history. It was a time when painters, having discovered the science of optics, held it to be a kind of philosophers' stone, when Fra Pacioli proposed as the paragon of art a solid with sixty-seven facets, even more intriguing than Cézanne's apple. The task of putting it in correct perspective baffled both Uccello and Francesca all their lives.

Perhaps someday again, Europe will come to feel the need of a communal art, didactic and released from too-individual contours. Mexico will then point the new, or rather the forgotten, way for Europe. The peak of originality reached by the Mexican movement was the shedding of personal idiosyncracies in the face of then-current Parisian taboos. For a while at least, we hoped to build an art as public, as complex, and as anonymous as that of the Middle Ages. Temperamental pride and the set habits of critics, however, splintered the group within a few years and let us fall apart, back to the lesser ways.

Aesthetics plays its role in art mainly in retrospect, as does stylistic analysis. Written by a practicing muralist, this book is concerned with pictures in the making rather than with the cooled-off product. As long as a mural remains unfinished, what kicks at the painter's innards is better set down in terms of materials, optical riddles, and human shortcomings, than described in terms of beauty. The world the muralist lives in is so very different from that of the critic. It is rich only in otherwise worthless things: wobbly scaffolds, lime troughs, sandboxes, pouncing sheets, and home-ground pigments. Mural painting can alone quench the need of the mural painter, and then only while in the making. Fame and success hallow this world only at the fringes. Young Rivera, penniless and lusty, sat fourteen hours a day up on a plank, brush in hand, face to the wall like any scolded schoolboy. Old Rivera, toothless, famous, and wealthy, sat brush in hand, fourteen hours a day, on a kitchen chair hoisted on four planks, his back still turned on the objective world. Money can buy no better color for fresco than the earth pigments sold in any *tlapaleria*, "wrapped in newspaper, at six cents a bagful," as Mexican muralist Juan Cordero had already found out in 1860.

Mexico is famous, even notorious, for its picturesque quality, and non-Mexicans take it for granted that this lightens the task of the artist. Despite this commonly held opinion, the best of Mexican painting remains impervious to the uniqueness of the sun-drenched locale. It is concerned rather with man alone, its somber hues keyed to the Indian skin. The meaning of both palette and concern can better be understood in the light of another, classical, idiom, which in Europe rose from Etruscan tombs to invade in time the ceiling and the walls of the Sistine, to bluster with Giulio Romano and ratiocinate with Poussin. The implications of this humanistic concern mean more to some artists than artistry itself. When Jacques Louis David, having finished his gigantic canvas "Le Sacre de Napoléon," invited the Emperor to his workshop to preview it, the painter must have relished more than any aesthetic disquisition the massive naïveté of Napoleon's comment: "Monsieur David, vous êtes un homme!"

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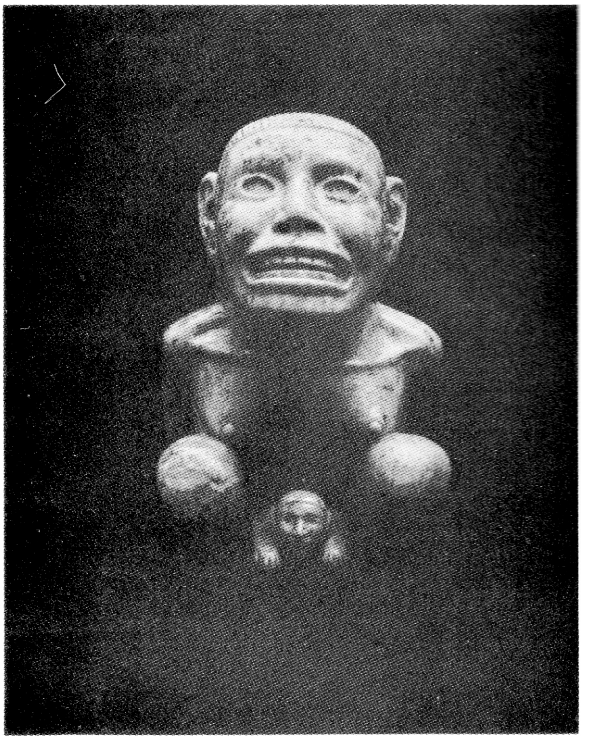
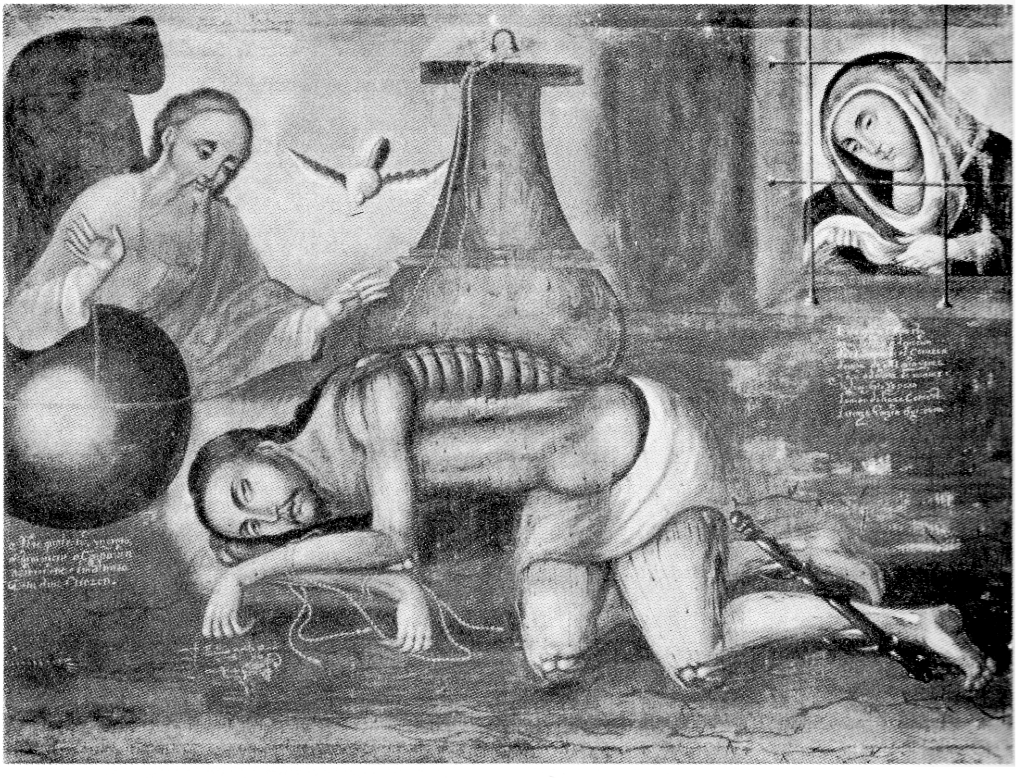


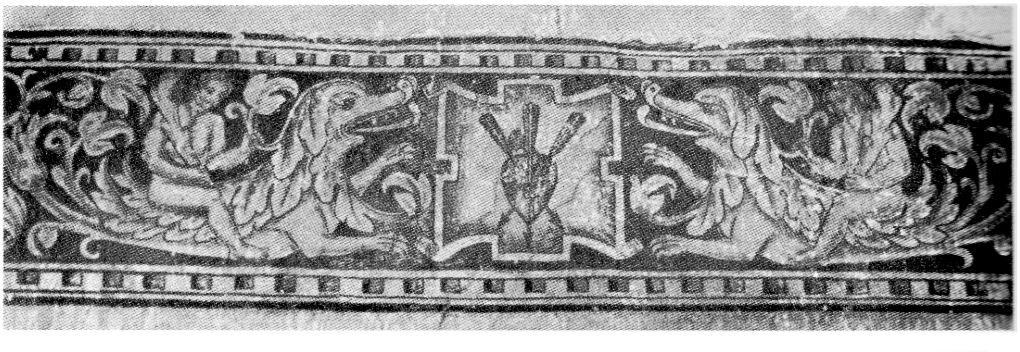
1a. Tlazolteotl, Aztec birth-goddess, aplite stone. Collection Robert Woods Bliss, Wash. Photo Joseph Brummer.

1b. Aztec serpent head, a theomorphic monolith composite of snake and butterfly forms with astronomical features. National Museum, Mexico. Photo Edward Weston.

1c. Codex page, first representation of the Madonna in the New World, 1525.
Courtesy Dirección de Monumentos Coloniales.



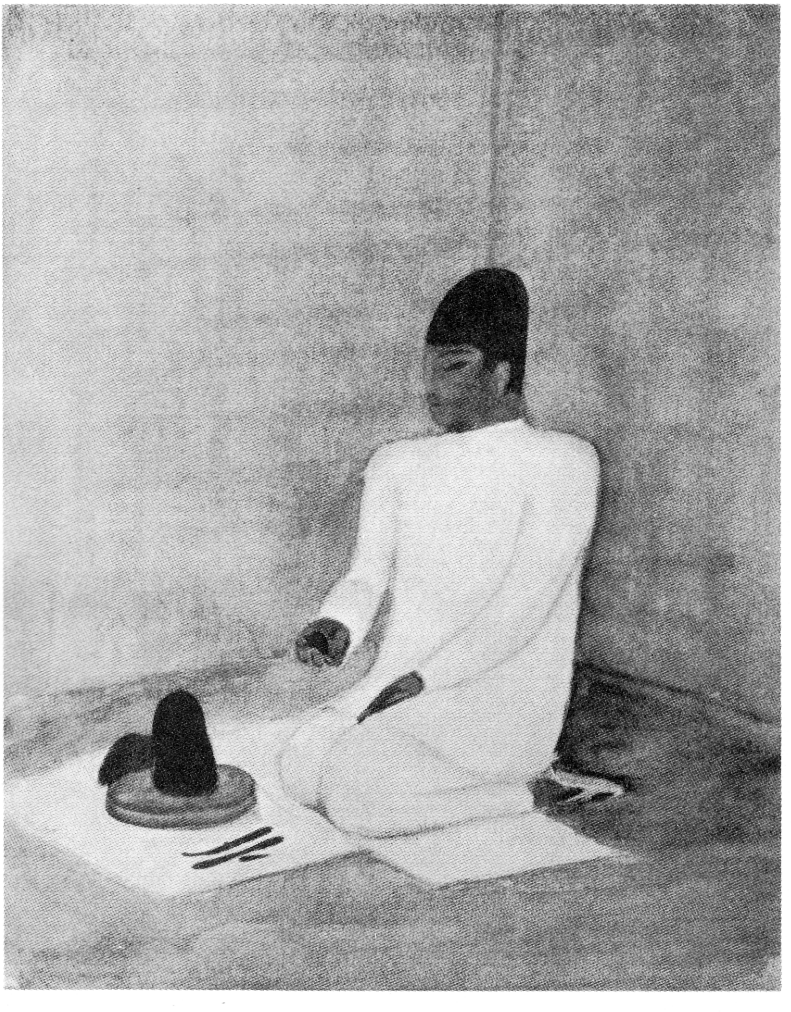
2a. SCOURGED CHRIST. Santo painted on tin. Early 19th c.



2b. Fresco frieze in a monastic cell, Actopán, 16th c. Courtesy Dirección de Monumentos Coloniales.

3. ST. CHRISTOPHER. Stone; 18th c.
Set in outdoor niche. Guadalajara.

4. ST. CHRISTOPHER, mural painting in the Church of Santiago Tlatelolco, ca. 1610, repainted 1763; approx. ht. 44 ft. Gaud Foto.



5. Charlot, PANDURO AT WORK, water color, 1924. San Pedro Tlaquepaque.

6. Pulquería painting. Anonymous. Mexico City, 20th c.

7. Jerónimo Antonio Gil, Academy drawing intended as model for students, 1794. Collection School of Fine Arts, Mexico. Photo Lola Álvarez Bravo.

8. Pelegrín Clavé, The Young Isabella at the Side of Her Sick Mother, 1855; print from a 19th c. negative. Collection School of Fine Arts, Mexico.

9a. Jorge Enciso, pen-and-ink cover design for the catalogue of his 1907 show.

9b. Roberto Montenegro, MARKET PLACE, etching, 1917. Courtesy of the artist.

10. Adolfo Best Maugard, GIRL WITH PITCHER, 1922. Courtesy of the artist.

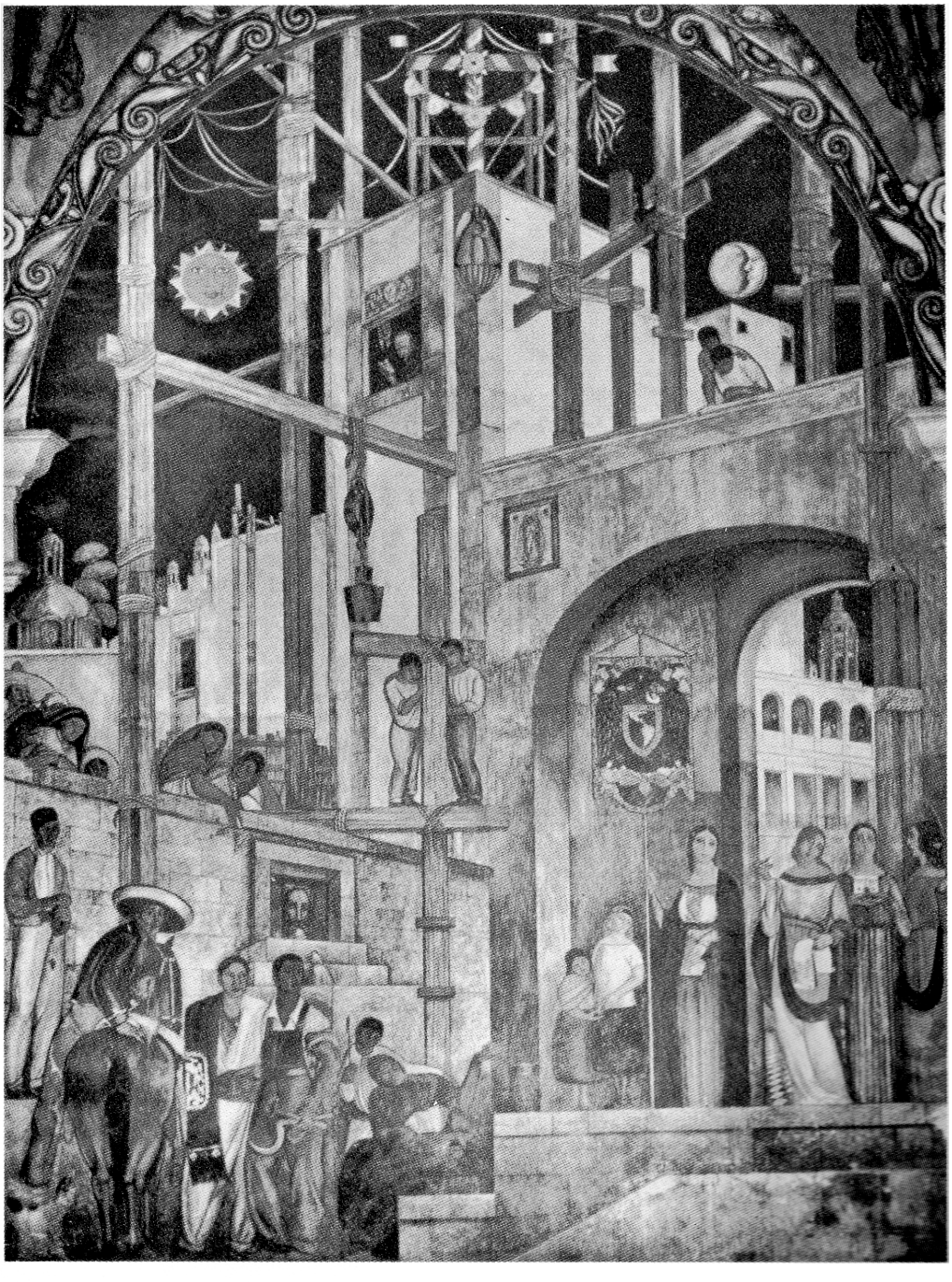
11. Carlos Mérida, PAJANACHEL, 1921. Courtesy of the artist.

12. Francisco Goitia, WOMEN MOURNING THEIR DEAD AFTER THE BATTLE, charcoal, ca. 1922. Photo courtesy Anita Brenner.

13. Francisco Goitia, STUDY FOR A RESURRECTION, charcoal and ink, ca. 1921. Photo courtesy Anita Brenner.

14. New Year's Banquet, National Palace, 1914. Seated from left to right: José Vasconcelos, Pancho Villa, Eulalio Gutiérrez, Emiliano Zapata; standing behind Gutiérrez, head bandaged: Otilio Montaño. News photograph Casasola.

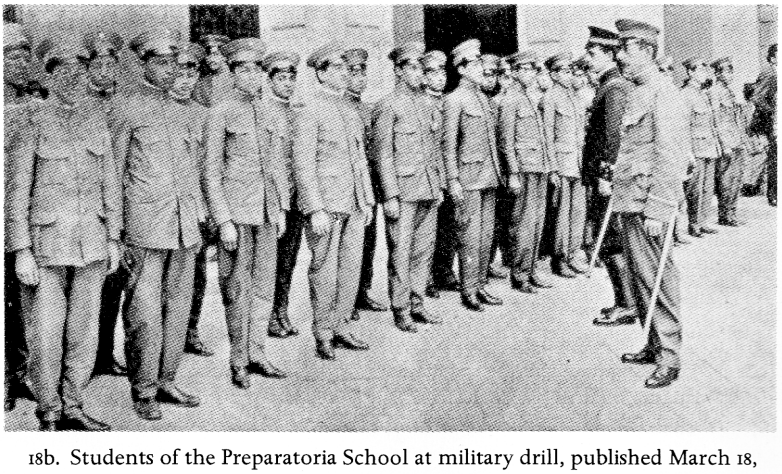
15. Nave of the former Church of San Pedro y San Pablo, with Roberto Montenegro's Dance of the Hours, 1922. Photo courtesy Dirección de Monumentos Coloniales.



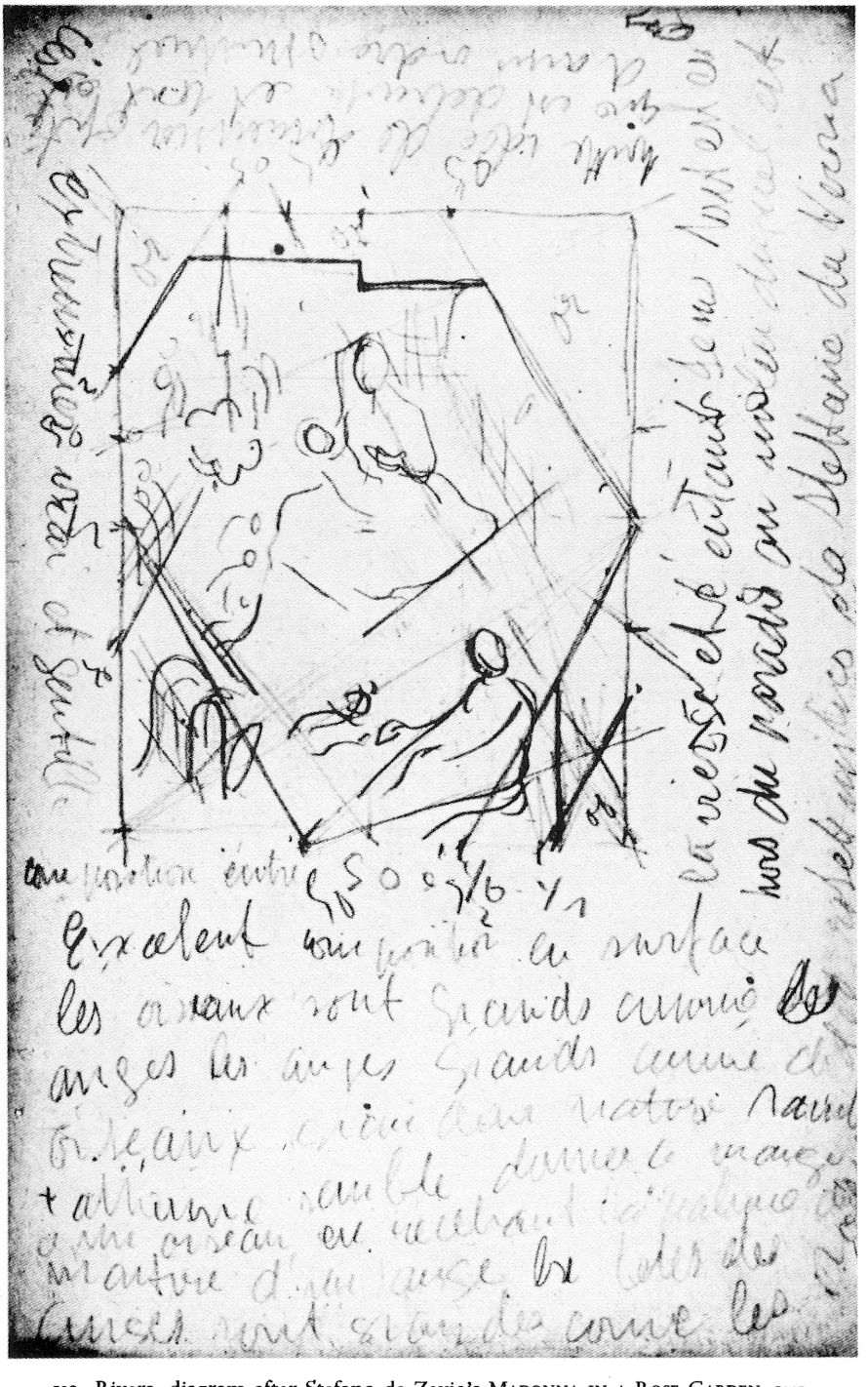
16. Roberto Montenegro, FEAST OF THE CROSS, fresco, 1923. Gaud Foto.

17. José Antonio Vallejo, detail of Holy Family with Seven Archangels, mural in the former chapel of San Pedro y San Pablo, 18th c. Preparatoria School. Gaud Foto.

18a. Juan Pacheco, copy of Juan Cordero's destroyed tempera mural TRIUMPH OF SCIENCE AND LABOR OVER IGNORANCE AND SLOTH, originally painted in main staircase of Preparatoria School, 1872. Collection Alfonso Toro. Gaud Foto.



18b. Students of the Preparatoria School at military drill, published March 18, 1914. News photograph.

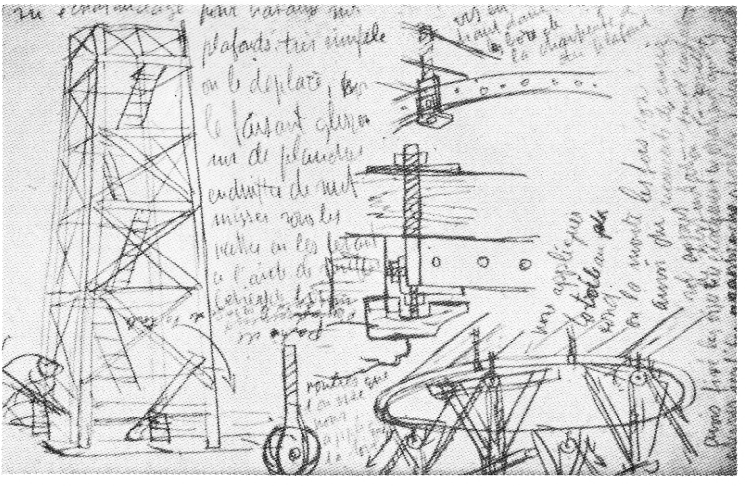


19a. Rivera, diagram after Stefano da Zevio's MADONNA IN A ROSE GARDEN, 1921. Collection Jean Charlot.

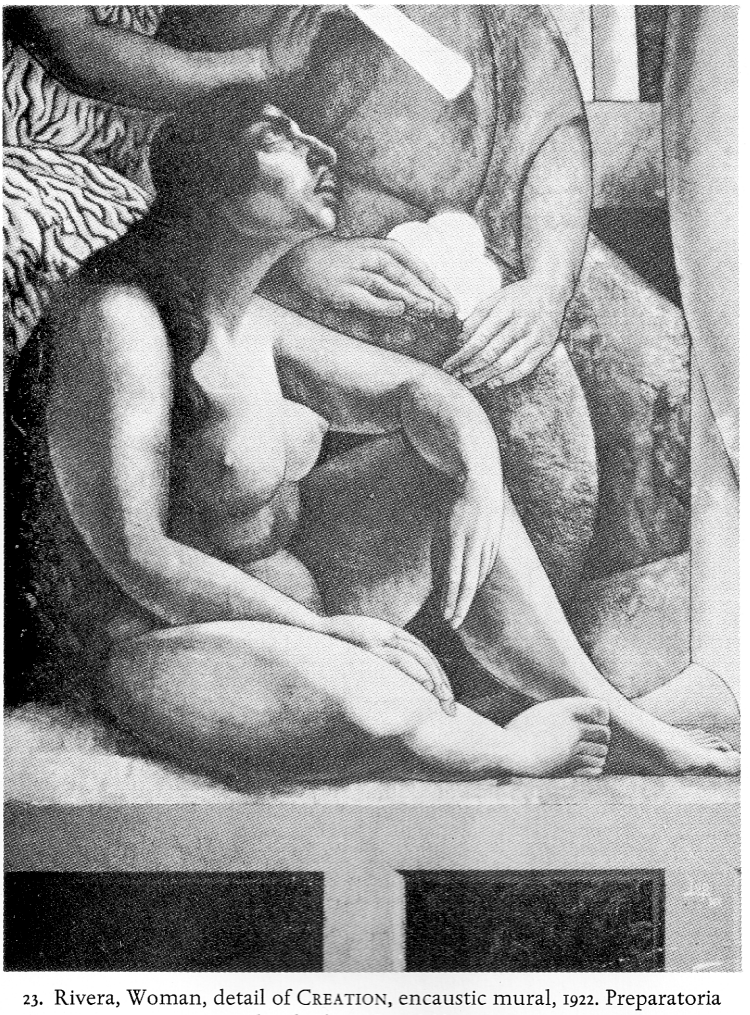
19b. Stefano da Zevio, MADONNA IN A ROSE GARDEN, 15th c. Museum of Art, Verona.

20. Rivera, SELF-PORTRAIT, crayon on wrapping paper, 1920. Formerly collection Angelina Beloff. Photo courtesy Angelina Beloff.

21. Rivera, MAN WITH A CIGARETTE, 1913. Collection Salo Hale, Mexico.

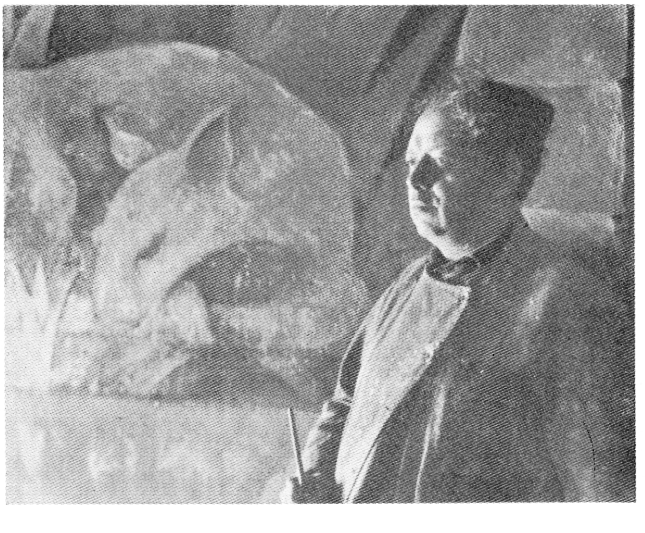


22. Rivera, sketch of a scaffold for mural work on ceiling, Italy, 1921. Collection Jean Charlot.



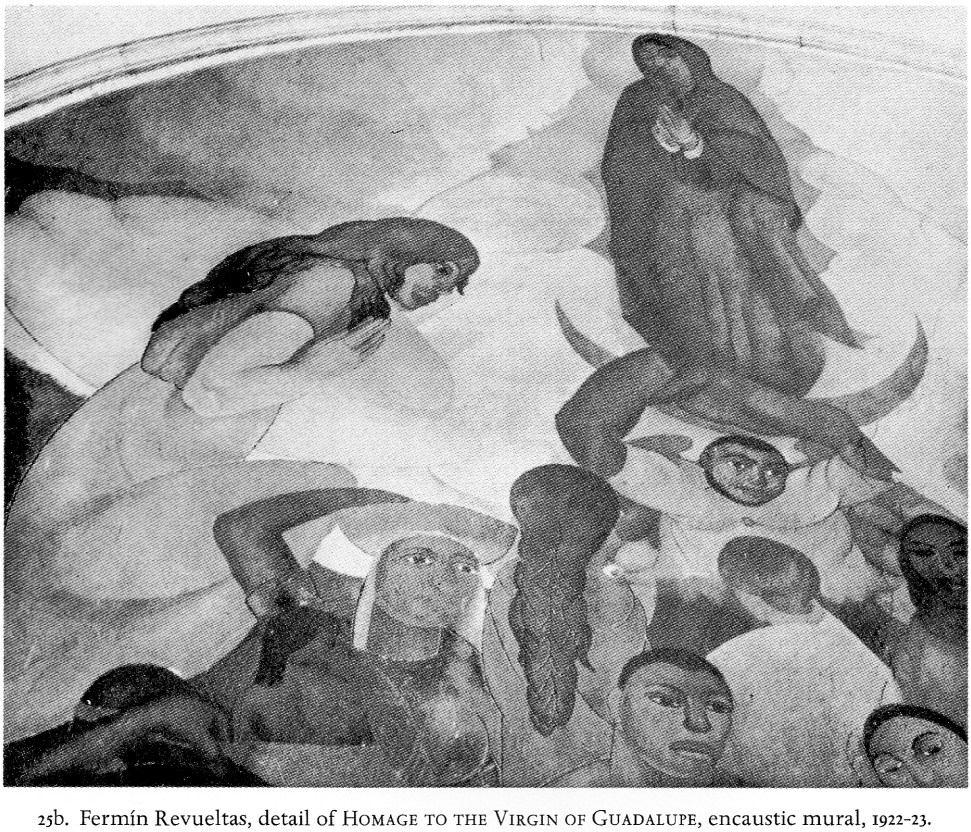
23. Rivera, Woman, detail of CREATION, encaustic mural, 1922. Preparatoria School. Photo Luis Márquez.

24a. Rivera at work on CREATION, 1922. Photo courtesy Anita Brenner.



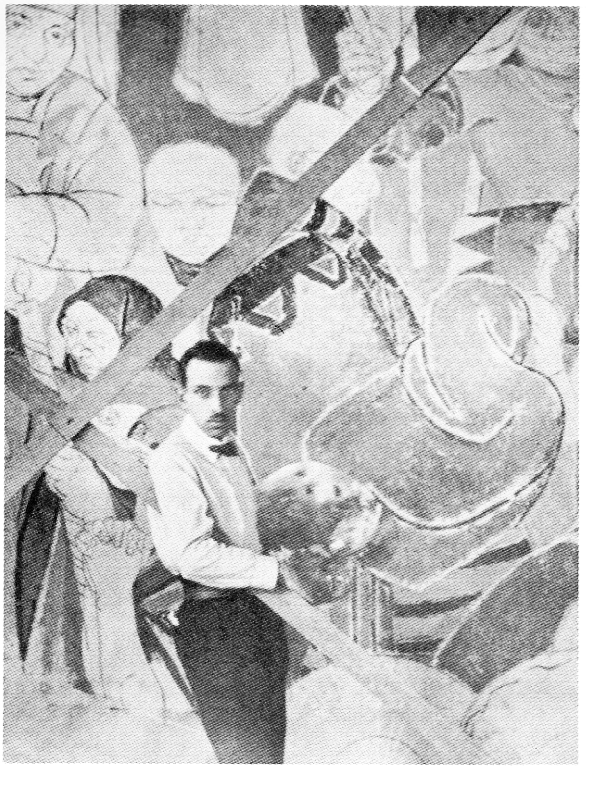
24b. Rivera at work on the *cueva*, 1923. Photo Luis Márquez.

25a. Fermín Revueltas, ca. 1922.



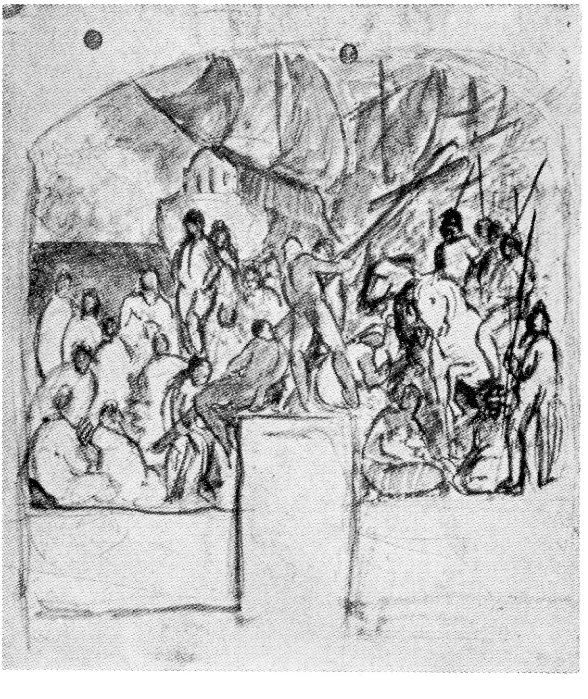
25b. Fermín Revueltas, detail of HOMAGE TO THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE, encaustic mural, 1922–23. Preparatoria School. Gaud Foto.

26a. Fernando Leal, detail of THE FEAST AT CHALMA, encaustic mural, 1922-23. Preparatoria School. Gaud Foto.



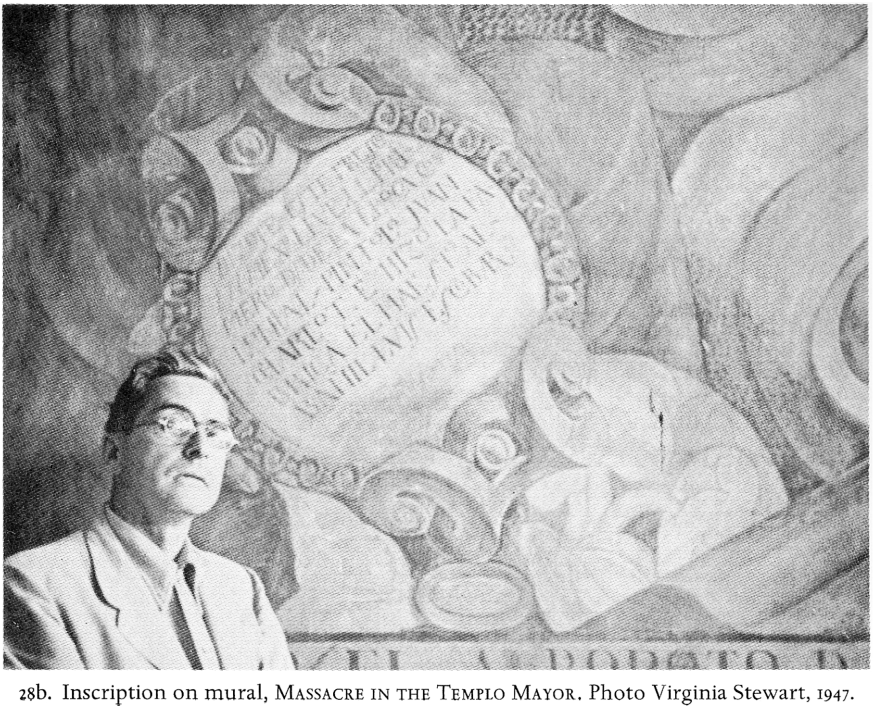
26b. Fernando Leal at work on THE FEAST AT CHALMA, 1923. Gaud Foto. Courtesy of the artist.

27a. Ramón Alva, detail of THE RAISING OF THE CROSS IN THE NEW WORLD, fresco mural, 1922-23. Preparatoria School. Gaud Foto.



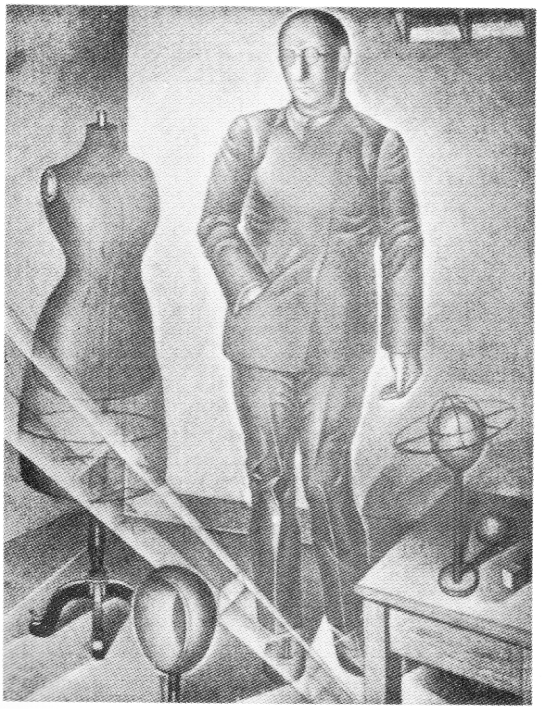
27b. Ramón Alva, water-color sketch for mural THE RAISING OF THE CROSS IN THE NEW WORLD, 1922. Collection Ramón Alva. Gaud Foto.

28a. Charlot, detail of Massacre in the Templo Mayor, fresco mural, 1922–23. Preparatoria School. Gaud Foto.

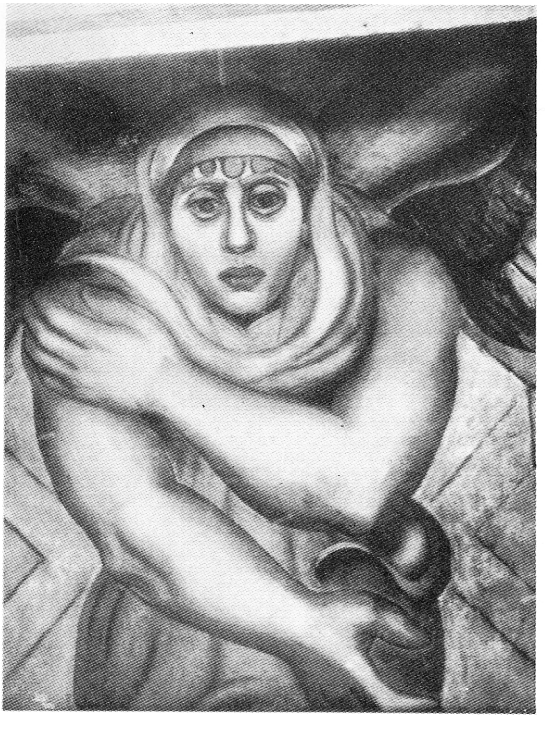


28b. Inscription on mural, Massacre in the Templo Mayor. Photo Virginia Stewart, 1947.

28c. Charlot standing before the completed mural, Feb. 1923.

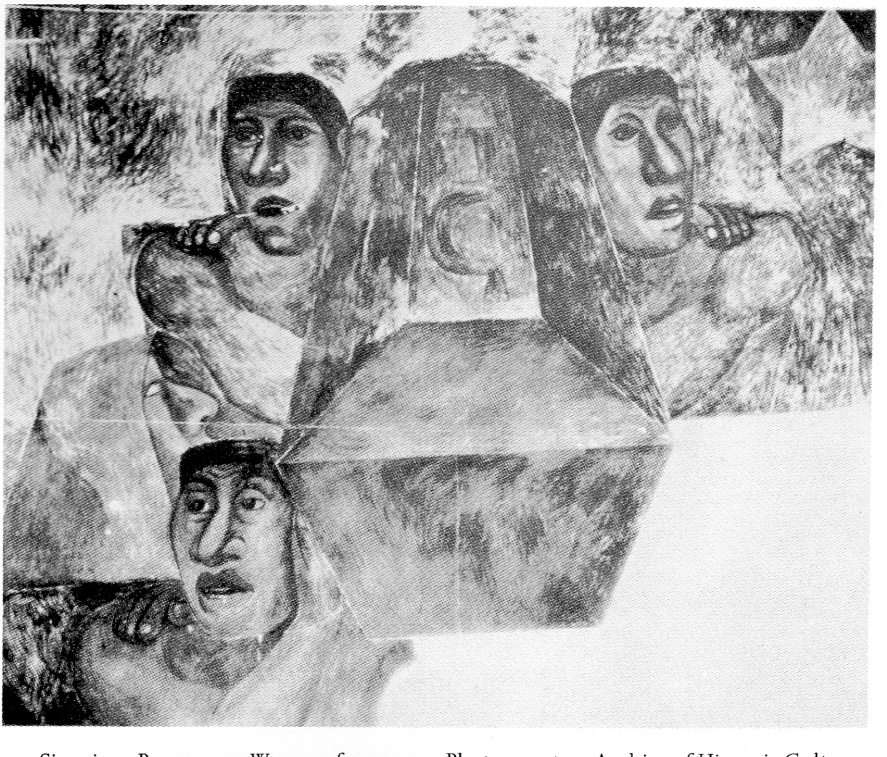


29. Siqueiros, PORTRAIT OF W. KENNEDY, pencil drawing, 1920. From *Vida Americana,* May 1921.



30. Siqueiros, detail of THE SPIRIT OF THE OCCIDENT DESCENDING UPON THE **AMERICAS, encaustic and fresco 1923.** Preparatoria School. Photo courtesy Jorge Juan Crespo.

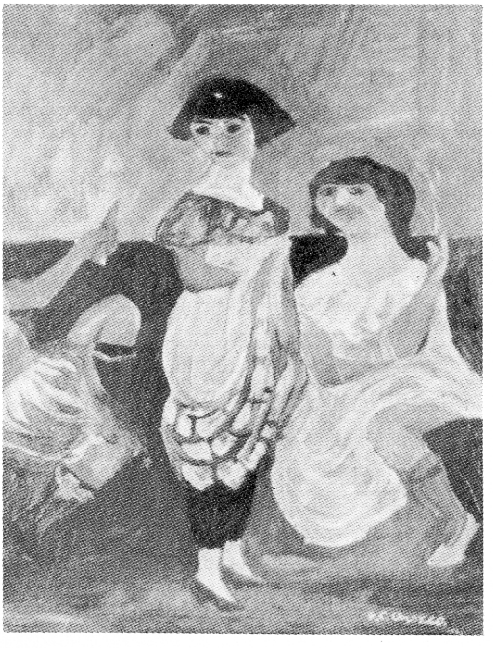
31. Siqueiros, study for DEMOCRACY, original fresco painted and destroyed by the artist in 1923. Collection Jean Charlot.



32. Siqueiros, BURIAL OF A WORKER, fresco, 1924. Photo courtesy Archive of Hispanic Culture, Washington, D.C.

33. Orozco, Rendition of The Last Spanish Troops on Mexican Soil at San Juan de Ulúa, 1917. Museum of San Juan de Ulúa, Veracruz. Gaud Foto.

34. Orozco, SCHOOLGIRL, pen and ink, ca. 1913.



35. Orozco, BORDELLO SCENE, oil on paper, ca. 1915. Originally collection Anita Brenner. Photo courtesy Anita Brenner.

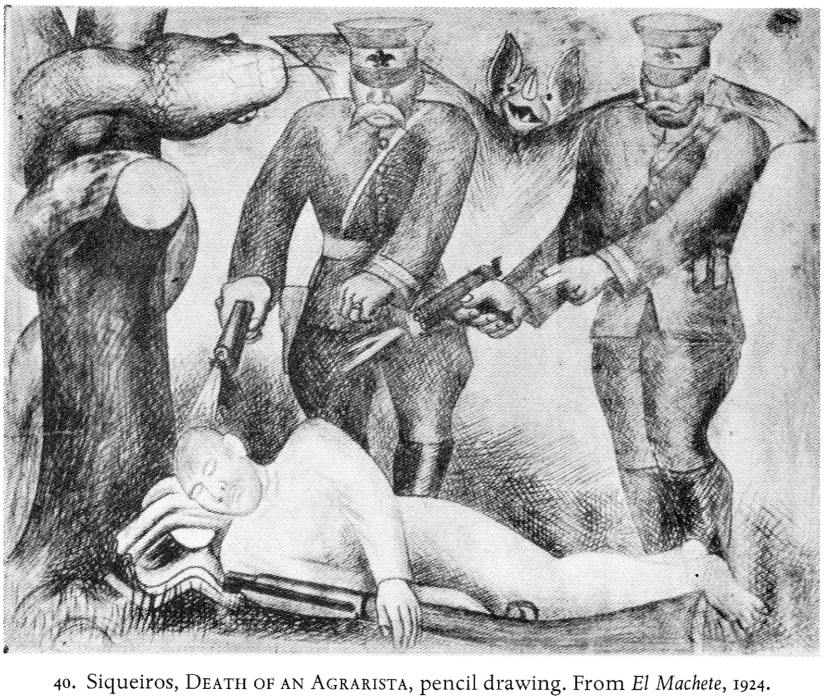
36. Orozco, detail of SPRING, mural painted and destroyed in 1923. Photo courtesy the Secretaría de Educación.

37a. Orozco, Revolutionary Trinity, first version, 1923-24. Photo courtesy Jorge Juan Crespo.

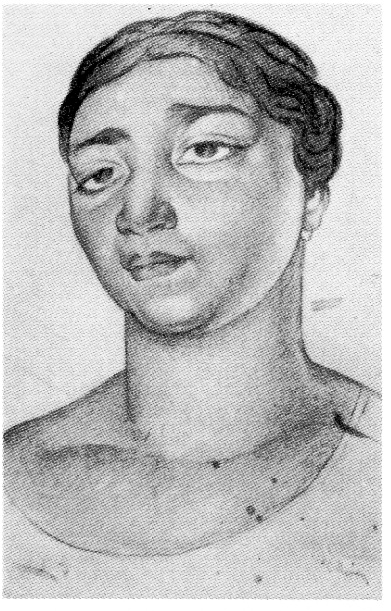
37b. Orozco, Revolutionary Trinity, final version, 1924.

38. A page of *El Machete*, March 1924, with Xavier Guerrero's woodcut, THE PARCELING OF THE LAND.

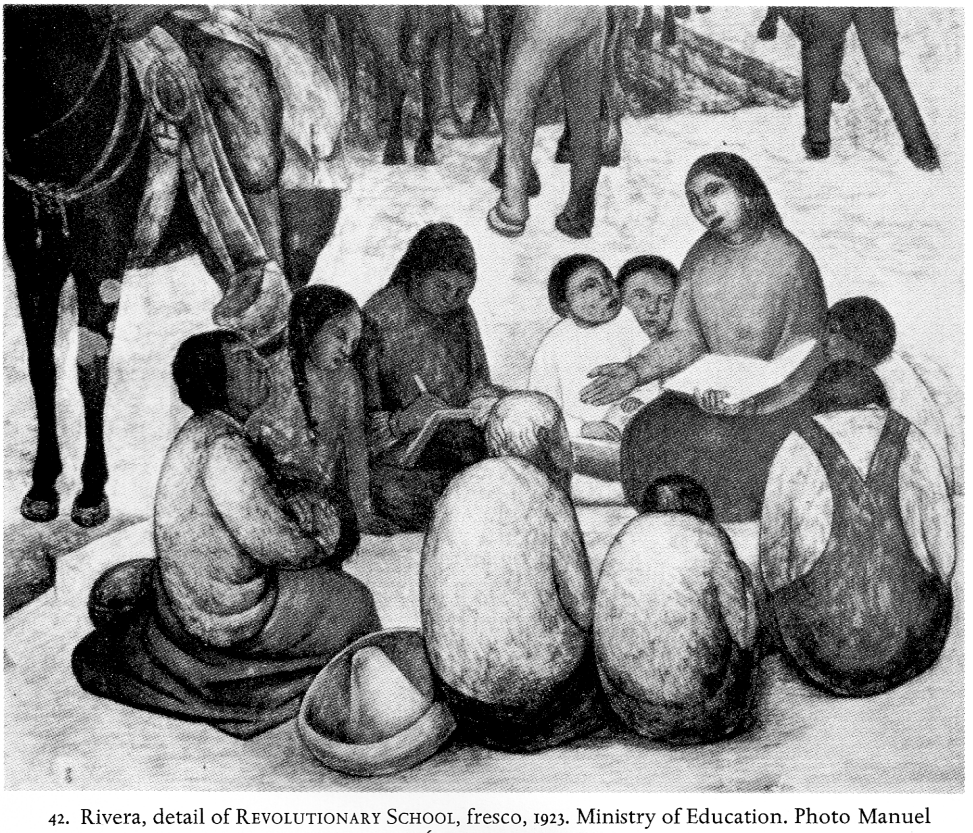
39. Siqueiros, KNEELING WORKER, FLAGELLATED AND BLEEDING, woodcut. From *El Machete,* 1924.



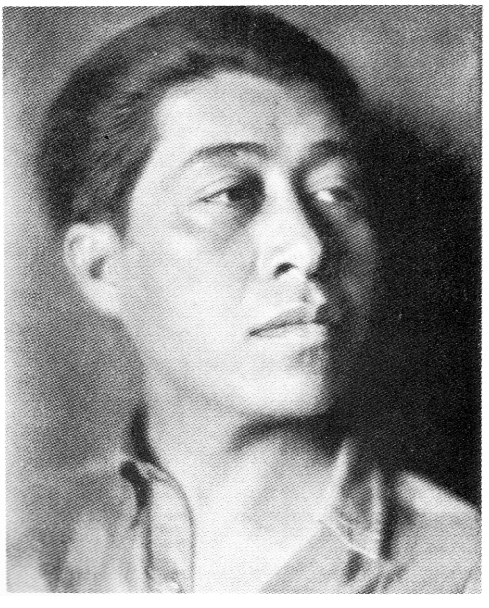
40. Siqueiros, DEATH OF AN AGRARISTA, pencil drawing. From *El Machete*, 1924.



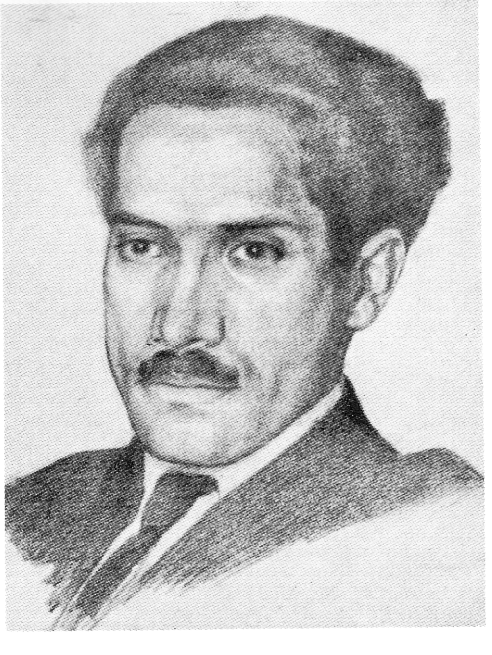
41. Rivera, TEHUANA, pencil sketch, 1922, used in his first fresco, Ministry of Education, 1923. Collection Anita Brenner.



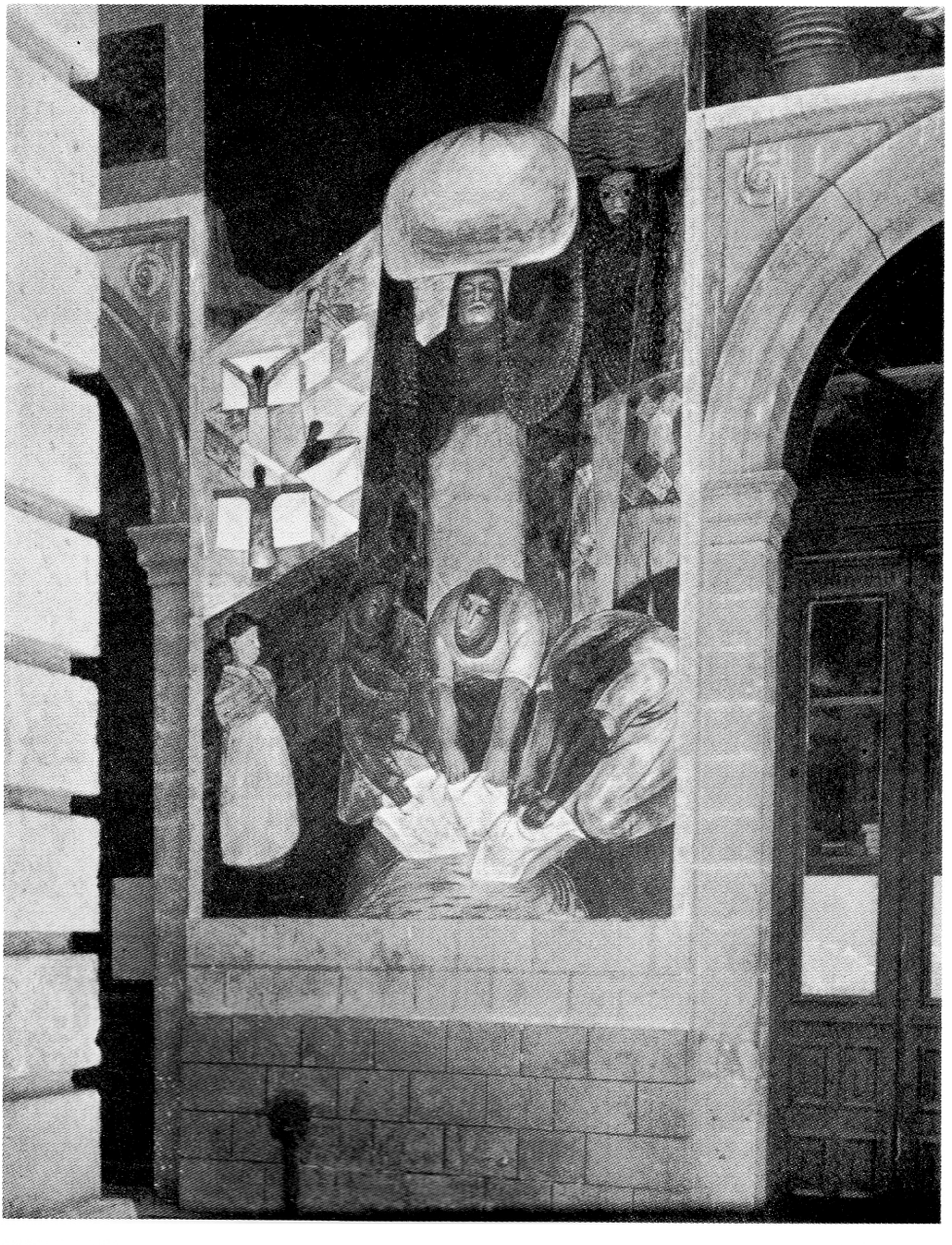
42. Rivera, detail of REVOLUTIONARY SCHOOL, fresco, 1923. Ministry of Education. Photo Manuel Álvarez Bravo.



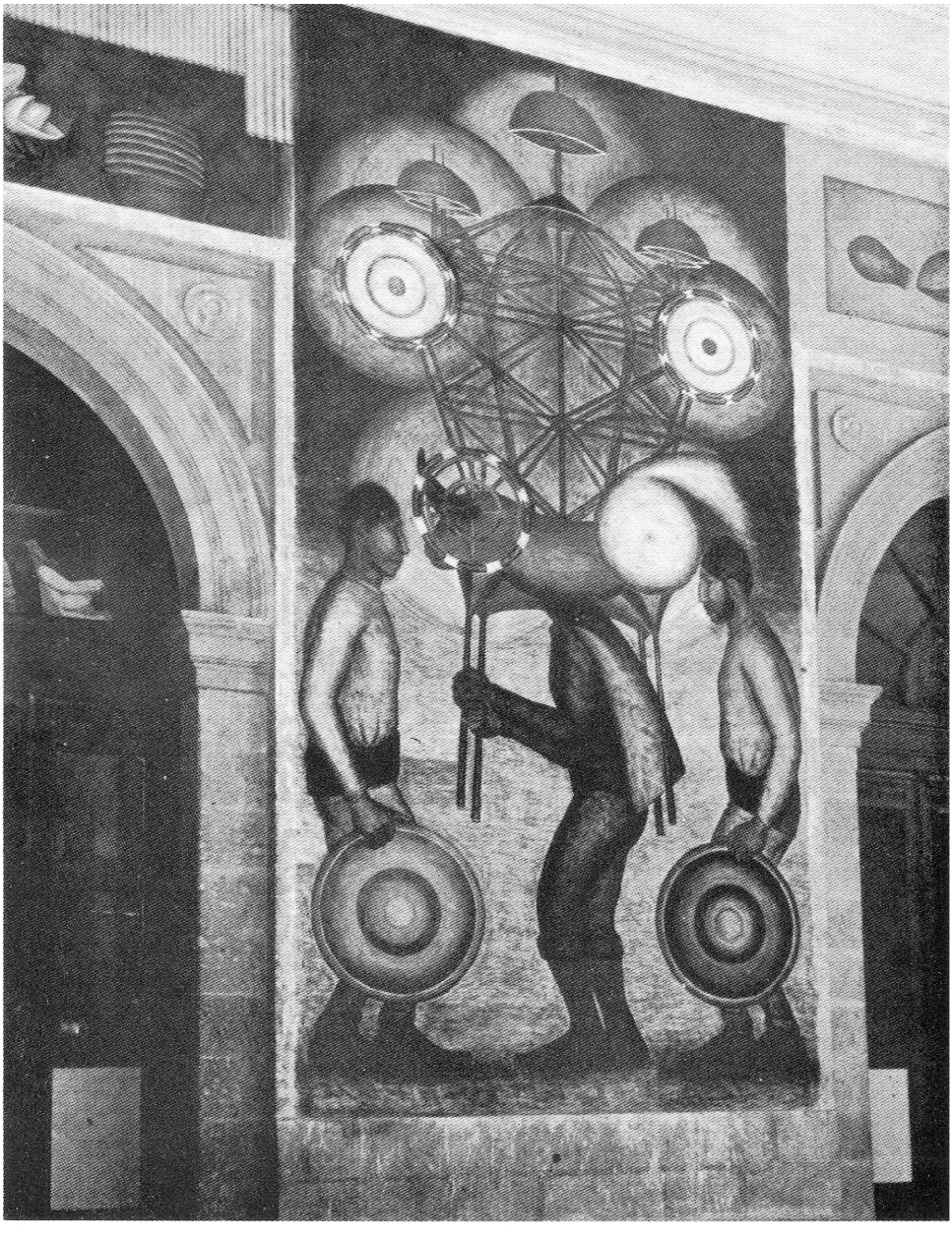
43. Xavier Guerrero, 1923. Photo Edward Weston.



44. Angelina Beloff, AMADO DE LA CUEVA, drawn in Paris, 1920. Courtesy Angelina Beloff.



45a. Charlot, LAVANDERAS, fresco, 1923. Ministry of Education. Gaud Foto.

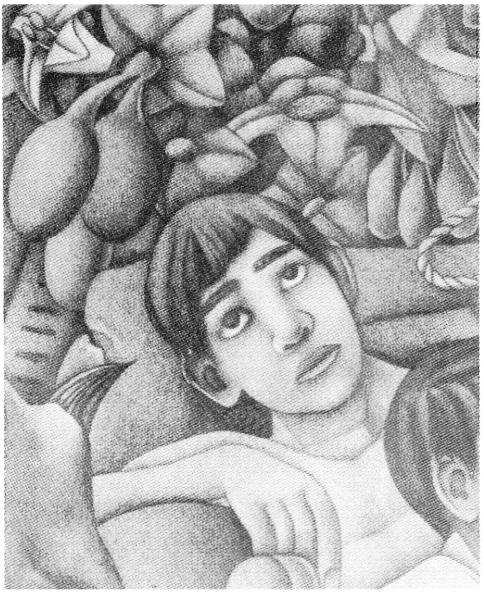


45b. Amado de la Cueva, El Torito, fresco, 1923. Ministry of Education. Gaud Foto.

46. Orozco, The Rich Grind the Face of the Poor, fresco, 1924; photographed in 1926, showing defacements after student riots. Courtesy Anita Brenner.

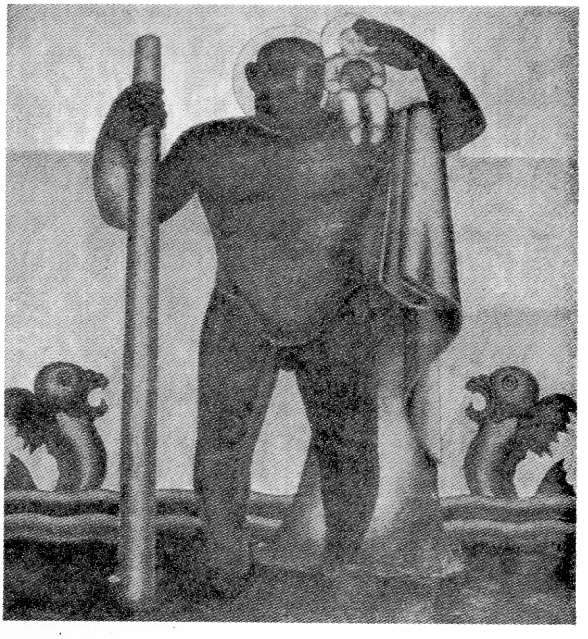
47a. Rivera, detail of Self-Portrait, fresco, 1925. Ministry of Education.

47b. Rivera, 1924. Photo Edward Weston.

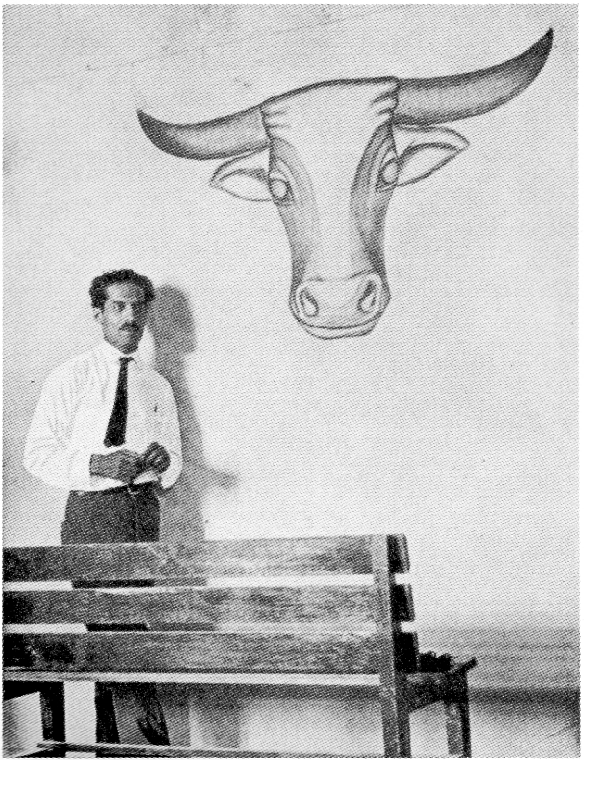


48. Máximo Pacheco, detail of pencil drawing, ca. 1925. Photo courtesy Anita Brenner.

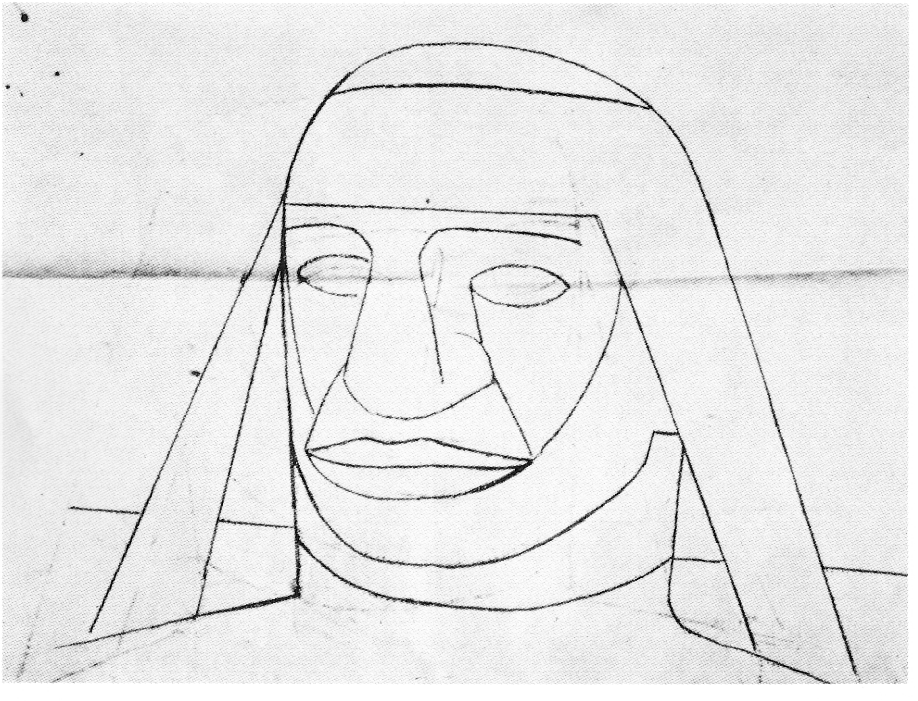
49. Carlos Orozco Romero standing before his mural, 1923. State Museum, Guadalajara. Photo courtesy of artist.



50a. Amado de la Cueva, ST. CHRISTOPHER, fresco, 1924, formerly in Palacio de Gobernación, Guadalajara; now destroyed.



50b. Amado de la Cueva at work on mural cartoon for fresco in the old University of Guadalajara, 1925. Photo courtesy Carlos Orozco Romero.



50c Amado de la Cueva, mural cartoon for AGUADOR, fresco in the old University of Guadalajara, 1925. Photo courtesy Anita Brenner.