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José-Clemente Orozco

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By Jean Charlot.



HERE is an old fairy-tale which ends in the following manner: "And the King strolled proudly over the streets of his capital, believing that he was dressed in magnificent garments, the making and adorning of which had cost several fortunes. But no one could see any kind of garments: yet no one dared to show surprise and thus embarrass the King. And the King said nothing for he certainly did not wish to betray that his own eyes saw less than those of his subjects. The courtesans eulogised him, and the crowds acclaimed him at every step. . . . Then, suddenly, a child shouted: "Look, the King is naked!"

We, the Post-Cubists, trailing down from Picasso—down, I say literally—are likewise strolling proud of our somewhat metaphysical garments, to wit, the Golden Section, the Egyptian Triangle, the Hermonious Door, the Fourth Dimensions, the History of Art and an ingenuty which is quite in every respect ingenious. The critics praise our garments. The public admires them. . . .

Every stroke of Orozco's brush, is like the voice of the fairy-tale child.

His great fortune has been that he has never gone to Europe. His sources are genuinely American. The United States gave him the mechanical elements of his work, Mexico the dramatic. The afán for Italianism which spring at the early stage of his art, and later, his experiments at Cubism, had no other intrinsic value than that of revealing to him his utter inability to follow others, and when he finally became convinced that he was a failure as a plagiarist, he resigned himself to the task of seeking his own road, of exploring along his own original bent. Every valid artist—and I do not doubt that Orozco belongs to such category—lives not with his generation, but just a little ahead of it. Because of this, it is the subsequent generation that extends to him its recognition. When all which was once contemporaneous arrives at being conventional and commonplace, such artists remain as the sole live force which has managed to escape the trite and established. Cubism, stripped of the enthusiasm which gave it initial impulse, became the visible body of painting, the insistent quality of the physical reality of an object. Fleeing from the spiritual, many artists drowned in this physical insistence. But the case of José Clemente Orozco defines rebellion and victory of the spiritual: He paints as a good orator talks, making the listener forget his person in the vivid communication of his story.

But by this I do not mean to say that he has forgotten the physical elements of art which have so much preoccupied our generation. It is only that he has never accepted it as a fetish. Compared with our orthodox painters, Orozco appears as a romanticist, and this classification assumes a hint of disapprobation at the lips of those who idolize the Golden Section, and especially of those who in the final truth do not understand the true significance of this "Golden Section." To a certain extent, however, they are right. But this romantic side of his work is no more than one angle created purely by chronological conditions. I believe that it is quite probable that within thirty years, when Cubism and Neo-Cubism shall be nothing more than passing incidents of art-history, the truly insistent

qualities of Orozco's work will define themselves in their essential monumentalism.

This monumental quality has grown to such proportions that the painter, by reducing his mediums, has placed himself within such strict limitations that a personality less heroic than his would have most likely perished. In the most recent of his frescos, which are, incidentally, his most splendid ones, we find a total disappearance of the multiplicity of colors: black, earthen shades and blue, compose his palette; his design has eliminated all academic preoccupations, audaciously simplifying itself; the subject, far from being a theme, is today a mere suggestion almost without description, more like a musical theme than an illustration (Because of this symphonic quality his painting assumes architectural proportions, and not because of a desire to make his personages more salient by amplification).

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Such discipline is the fruit of an aesthetic ideal. Blessed with uncommon craftsmanship which is marked by an inclination for complex anatomical design, the painter has gone ahead deliberately casting aside all that is easily accessible, and, in order to be near to his inner vision, brushed away the accidental. "Looping-the-loop," his most recent work, appears to have been so easily accomplished that many have accused him of not knowing how to finish a work.

This process of absorbing the individual through inner vision can only define a constant struggle. The absolute of this process of purification had to overcome the relative of daily needs and the advice of friends and critics, but the will of the artist was strong enough to subordinate in the end his personality for the sake of impersonal exigencies of the work. This struggle left scars in his early frescos, but the peace won is a powerful kind of peace, not the peace of the weak, in whom there are no conflicts for the sheer lacking of passion.

The theme in these works, despite its purification, is inescapable. The painter passionately projects himself in his art, provoking the ire of "aesthetic intelligencia," and enthusing the uninitiated, because of melodramatic reasons, meanwhile fleeing from both, fearing that he may be misunderstood for an "intellectual." Thus, his experiments in attempting to escape his own originality can be indexed and justified. In these experiments, however, he met with failure. It is that the ideation, the composition and execution of his work follow one another in such swift succession and are so intricately mixed, that they appear practically simultaneous, and to such an extent that the artist himself, I venture to say, could not isolate them. Orozco told me that painting for him is as natural as eating. This is certainly true, but natural does not mean simple, and the process of nutrition and assimilation in all its complexities is an excellent parallel with the process of this painter's work which is equally as vital and as complex.

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a receptive state, into a state of expectant passivity. All effort that he is likely to make over the work in gestation, qualities which are explicable and demonstrable, is surely to result in injury to the other qualities, imponderable but vitally important, vastly superior to those which he himself can elect. This process is well known to the lyric poet, who without the element of inspiration can never attain in his poetry anything more than mere versifying.

Where the painter's logic must intervene is in the necessary study for the technical realization of his ideation and the coordination and orchestration, for the aim of achieving an architectural unison, of the multiple traces of painting to a sum total which will possess, as in chemistry and music, its proper and distinct unblended qualities.

Orozco expresses all of his concepts, as divers as they might be, antropomorphically: the man appears to be the sole subject of his work; he is surrounded by the complement details, architecture, and the tools of his work. The natural substances, landscapes, for instance, hardly ever appear and if they do, they appear in very reduced and simple form, merely in order to sustain the major theme. In this, Orozco is decidedly a painter of the Occident. But of his obsession with the man, which is far from being an exaltation, there is born a suggestion of something incomplete, of something weak in the scheme of the major theme. He gives us examples of human activities, but for the beauty and logic which are displayed in the depicted, such activities fail in their aims, either prior or after their consummation. There is drama, not in the actors but in the superhuman, almost anti-human atmosphere which surrounds and permeates the actors.

If Orozco was simply a pessimist his art could never attain the quality it has. Orozco sees, in that same casual degradation of man, a curious affirmation of his grandeur. Thanks to the three positive virtues: Introspection, Force and Beauty, man harmonizes in the end with the invisible (See fresco in the House of Tiles).

If we attempt to analyze the physical mediums used by this artist, we are likely to be surprised at the extreme simplicity of his compositions translated into regular geometrical concepts. In order to fill in an arch he depicts the curve of a human spine; at the sides of a door he establishes two diagonals which, prolonged by the eye, form a pyramid. Another mode of treatment consists in diagonals crossing the total of his composition, without an apparent counterpart which can sustain it. There are times when Orozco manages to unify his painting with architecture, thanks to a mental process, such as, for instance, hands stretching out over the arch of a corridor, which illustrate the architectural function of the keystone of the arch.

As a careful study will show, his composition, despite its superficial, rustic simplicity, does not give a full measure of the logic of the amalgam. On the other hand, to study the three floors of the Escuela Preparatoria—with the dense red earth on the lower floor, the greys of the middle floor and the rose and atmospheric blues of the upper floor, is to become convinced that these frescos are very well balanced and are in unison with the architecture. Thus we arrive at the important truth that Orozco does not compose in the superficial. Orozco composes always in profundity, i. e. in three dimensions, balancing these by volume and space.

If the painting of Orozco, full of strong emotional elements, has resisted this dangerous saturation, and sustained itself plastically, it is due to the fact that the creator has always considered paint much as any good craftsman considers the materials he works with. His palette, while most adequately selected for the expression of his ideas, is not selected for psychological reasons, but in order to contain the colors which are likely to prove more lasting in frescos.

Orozco is not interested in abstract theories. If his compositions do not adhere to standard patterns, historical and geometrical proofs, he asks to be pardoned, but he asks this smilingly.



A striking symbolical work by José Clemente Orozco.