

OROZCO'S STYLISTIC EVOLUTION

By Jean Charlot

AS IS customary in treating of the work of important artists, critics have attempted to interpret Orozco's stylistic evolution. Such attempts remain premature until the different parts of his work fit into a more definitive chronological sequence than is the case at present. For example important sources of style have been overlooked or underestimated: for a decade Orozco was preeminently a cartoonist, following the great Mexican tradition of Constantino Escalante and Villasaña, and his monumental work of today still shows the conditioning of hand and brain working at the grinding job of issuing daily topical satirical drawings. Some of the critics who analyzed the sources of Orozco's style, more easily aware of scholarly influences such as those of Byzantium and the Italian Renaissance, ignored these less learned, if most vivid, models. Other commentators, though well aware of this, preferred to bypass the early period in order not to displease the quick tempered artist, mistakenly disdainful of the less dignified productions of his youth.

The major obstacle to an understanding of Orozco's *oeuvre* remains the insecure dating of much of his work, a state of affairs unusual in the case of a contemporary artist. The main object of this analysis is to propose a correct respective dating of the early drawings and wash drawings that divide naturally into two series, that of women: schoolgirls and prostitutes, and that of episodes of the Revolution. Present dating, such as that used in the National Show of 1947, held in the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, presents the two series as overlapping in time regardless of the wide divergence of styles. To correct this generally accepted dating we quote from what passages bear on the sequence of the artist's work in the writings of contemporary critics.

Earliest public mention refers to his contribution to the all-Mexican show that took place in 1910 at the Academy of San Carlos.¹ It divides his contribution into two groups, caricatures and compositions. Of the latter group, presumably serious in intent, given that it is contrasted with the caricatures by the reviewer, nothing remains today. The artist remembered only that they were charcoal drawings.

What did the caricatures look like? They showed "strong draftsmanship, with lines bold and firm, supremely expressive and full of very deep inten-

¹ Genaro Garcia, *Cronica oficial de las fiestas del primer centenario* (Mexico, 1911).

tions." This description fits as well a slightly later set of cartoons—and the earliest still preserved—that Orozco did in 1911-1912 for *El Abuzote*. We may surmise in turn that the caricatures shown in 1910 were of similar vintage, minus the added zest that the fall of Porfirio Diaz and the rise of Madero gave to Orozco's political outlook soon after the close of the San Carlos show.

The next description of Orozco's work is found in the Tablada interview of November 1913, written after the assassination of President Madero, while General Victoriano Huerta was dictator and president.² The live stuff of which the Revolution drawings of Orozco are powerful reflections permeated the scene. Mexico City had experienced a few months before *La Decena Tragica*, the tragic ten days, a city-wide civil war that had strewn so many corpses in the gutters that funeral pyres were hastily improvised to minimize the danger of a plague. A young painter, Alfredo Zalce, remembers of these days how as a child going to grammar school he had failed to return one afternoon from his classes. His alarmed parents, scouting the neighborhood in despair, finally located the lad squatting entranced beside a sprawling corpse, watching flies caper along its frozen features. Doubtless, Orozco too drank in the strong spectacle with a deeper insight and optical persistency than many a citizen. But it appears that none of his reactions took the form of sketches. The artist's reputation at that date, his aesthetic preoccupations and actual realizations are all clearly set down in Tablada's article, whose title emphasizes the difference between the young Orozco and the mature master of today: "A painter of woman."

When the artist gives his name to his host, Tablada, "I place him mentally. Orozco; the cartoonist? Now I remember certain cartoons in *El Abuzote*, rich in intention, in energy and cruelty. . . . 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. "Of the writer's visit to the artist's studio: "On the walls and in portfolios the water colors, pastels and drawings that are up to now the whole work of Orozco. As the artist said, woman is the perpetual theme of all these works. . . ."

By 1914 Huerta was in flight; Carranza, Villa and Zapata were engaged in a royal melee around the vacant presidential chair. Channelled into politics by his friend and exalted mentor, Dr. Atl, Orozco sided with Carranza, following him into hasty retreat when enemy hordes overran the capital. In and

² José Juan Tablada, "Un pintor de la Mujer: José Celeste Orozco," *El Mundo Ilustrado* (November 9, 1913).

around the staff headquarters in Orizaba, Orozco witnessed another chunk of active revolutionary turmoil, including the looting of churches and the daily shooting of white-clad Zapatistas. We have a series of drawings dating from this very place and period, those that the artist made for "La Vanguardia," a periodical printed through 1915 to uphold the morale of the Carranzistas at this the leanest moment of their political and military fortunes.

Comparing the "Vanguardia" illustrations with those that the artist contributed a few years before to *El Abuzote*, one realizes how his style has matured in the ratio of the simplification of his means. No more washes of intermediate grays, no more intricate cross-hatchings. The 1915 drawings are evoked in a kind of plastic shorthand, a thick crinkled line jotted down with an ink-loaded brush or reed. An oriental economy of statement tends to cram the fewest possible lines with saturated emotion. As to subject matter, there are searing political attacks on Huerta and on the Villa puppet, President Roque Gonzalez Garza, comical renderings of ladies, presumably of reactionary leanings, also anticlerical cartoons. The more direct references to the raging civil war are carefully contrived to present the Revolution at its alluring best, an understandable editorial slant in a paper whose purpose was to buck up the spirit of momentarily defeated troops: These propaganda drawings are variants of the previous school girl's series, with a caption designed to give a novel slant to the pre-revolutionary types. Under a set of girlish heads, with hair-ribbons and wide eyes appeared "Soldiers of the Revolution, your mates are awaiting your return to give you your well-deserved reward!" Or a girl of the same pattern, with the ribbon replaced by a military cap, and a cartridge belt and bandoleer slung over the school girl skirt and blouse, smiles widely, arms raised against an apotheosis of sunrays. Nowhere is there even a premonition of the bitterness and hopelessness that are synonymous with the Revolution drawings that we know today.

In 1915, Carranza returns victorious to the capital, and Orozco's political tutor, Atl, is instrumental in the sack of one of the city's churches, with Orozco presumably again an attentive witness, again storing up memories. All through the revolution the artist seems to have followed the method that Tablada relayed in 1913, "He tells me that he had drawn much from the model at the school of Fine Arts, and that now, to shake off academism, he prefers to observe the model in movement, storing mental impressions that he paints later." How much later than the events depicted were drawn and painted the episodes of the Revolution?

In May, 1916, Orozco contributes to a group show—some watercolors of prostitutes similar to those that Tablada had seen in 1913.³ On this occa-

sion, the artist's friend, Atl, gives us a total listing of Orozco's works that brings up to date the one given three years before by Tablada: "The series of works shown here is but one of the facets of his temperament. To judge him *in toto*, it is imperative to look at his drawings of school girls, his political and anti-clerical cartoons, and his strong symbolical drawings. The day that Orozco shows those works as a unit, the public will be better able to appreciate him at his worth. . . ."

The following September Orozco gives his first one-man show. Its catalogue lists as the *pièce de résistance* the twin sets on feminine subjects, school girls and prostitutes. Besides, it lists political caricatures, and two studies for the major 1915 oil, "San Juan de Ulua," a first government commission. That the artist was not keeping any important thing in his portfolios, such as a set of revolution drawings that would have been a striking departure from the style and subject of his known work, is made clear when, in 1923, he reminisces, "In 1916, I gave an exhibition that summed up my technical progresses and my esthetic ideas up to then."⁴

The emotional letdown resulting from the rebuffs and unkind comments evoked by his first one-man show ushers Orozco into a period of relative inactivity that was to last until mid-1923. Writing in 1922, Tablada reluctantly considered the career of the artist whom he had helped discover at an end, "Orozco gave up his life work when he sadly realized that he meant nothing to a public hopelessly incapable of appreciating his gifts."⁵

When Walter Pach visited the artist's studio in 1922, he was shown the same water colors of women that were exhibited in 1916, and it is on the strength of this evidence that he wrote the clear-sighted and enthusiastic appraisal that renewed Orozco's waning faith in his star.⁶

In December, 1922, to the show "Art Action" organized by friend Atl, Orozco contributed a number of the same water colors, and again, in March, 1923, sent some of them to the New York Independents, with the Mexican group.

From June, 1923, when he begins painting frescoes in the Preparatoria, to August, 1924, when work is officially stopped and the painter brusquely dismissed, Orozco's attention remained centered on his mural work, and a crop

³ In the magazine *Accion Mundial* of which Atl was the editor, June 3, 1916.

⁴ Quoted from a manuscript of Orozco, unpublished.

⁵ José Juan Tablada, "Mexican Painting Today," *International Studio* (January, 1923).

⁶ Walter Pach, "Impresiones sobre el arte actual de Mexico," *Mexico Moderno* (October, 1922).

of related studies preceded the execution of the giant nudes (Tzontemoc, Maternity), of the religious themes (Christ Burning His Cross, the Franciscan series), of the blown-up cartoons (The Rich Sup, the procession of *fantocci* of the second floor). The now famous Revolution murals in the same building belong to a later period. That Orozco was not pursuing at the same time that he painted these murals any innovations in subject and style on a smaller scale is made clear in Tablada's article published in the *International Studio*, March, 1924, "Orozco, the Mexican Goya." Tablada describes the well-known themes, school girls and prostitutes, using in part the text of his 1913 article, reproduces a number of works of the same period, and prophesies a brilliant mural career for the artist.

Orozco's first authenticated depiction of scenes witnessed in the civil war is to be found in the Orizaba fresco, painted in the lull between the stoppage of work at the Preparatoria and the resumption of the same work in 1926. Revisiting the scene of his "Vanguardia" days may have prompted the painter to recreate with the brush the models he had stored for so long at the back of his retina. This first step remains cautious. First to be painted, the top frieze, an overdoor panel, arranges men with guns and spades in a stiffly symmetrical diagonal pattern that remains more symbolical than factual. But the two uprights that flank the doorjamb are closer to things remembered, and already imbued with the bitter pessimistic mood that will stamp other Revolution scenes. A *soldadera* dries the sweat off an exhausted soldier's features, weeping rebozoed women huddle together for comfort.

When Orozco returned to the Preparatoria at the beginning of 1926, he amplified this first Revolution statement. He tore down the more damaged panels of the ground floor, both because of their ruinous condition and because the neo-classical flavor of the muscular giants did not satisfy him anymore. He was now content to have his master mason volunteer as model, whose round shoulders, and paunch, and bushy mustache, are multiplied in the frescoes of that period. He worked against extreme odds, in the often aggressive turmoil of students' pranks, plodding painfully towards an individual technique, hampered by a salary far below a family's living standard, with the menace of a second suspension of the work hanging threateningly over his head. It is then that he painted on the ground floor symbolical tableaux on revolutionary themes (Revolutionary Trinity, The Trench, The Destruction of the Old Order), and in the upper corridor the series of revolutionary themes (Rearguard, Reconstruction, Grave-digger, Women in the Fields, The Adieu, etc.) that remain unmatched in his work for concentrated depth of statement.

My personal recollection places some time in the period that followed the stoppage of work at the Preparatoria the beginning of the revolutionary wash-drawings. Anita Brenner in "Idols Behind Altars," published in 1929, but whose writing is contemporary with these events, confirmed my recollection as she states, "The fresco in Orizaba, the third pier of the Preparatoria School and the changed panel in the first, several oil paintings and about fifty ink and pencil scenes of the Revolution are all of a piece in period, mood, control and expressed passion."

I asked Anita Brenner to elaborate on her published statement, and she answered:

"Dear Jean:

"I have delayed writing you the data you asked for about the personal history behind Orozco's famous Revolutionary Series, because I have been expecting my books and papers to arrive from New York, and I am quite sure that the details are in the notebook I kept at that time.

"However, since I know you need this material, I am sending you this memo, and will supplement it with excerpts from the notebook when I have it again in my possession. . . .

"You will remember that at this time, in view of the financial and emotional hardships Orozco was facing, his friends scouted around for solutions. His most insistent friend in that respect was Manuel Rodriguez Lozano, who used to come to see me often, sometimes with and sometimes without Orozco, insisting that I help. Of course I was willing to, but there wasn't very much I could do. However, I suggested we invent a mythical *gringo* who was writing a book about the Revolution, and who wanted illustrations. We told Orozco that this *gringo* would like to buy six black and whites about the Revolution, but that he was away at the moment and had left me the money to pay with, at the same time stating he was willing to take whatever I suggested. This mythical *gringo* was me, of course, and I think I borrowed the money, because I am sure I didn't have it. It was necessary to invent him, naturally, because we were afraid Orozco would not have taken the money from me, even in exchange for work.

"You will remember the excitement of Lozano and other friends when these drawings—which turned out to be no drawings at all but pen-and-ink gouaches—were completed. Orozco had the whole pent-up volcano of his experiences and his feelings in the Revolution in these. What happened also was that he himself got so interested in what he was doing that he continued with the idea after the six originals were done, as I remember the series came to something like 30 or 40. These first six I still have. . . ."

When the expected notebooks arrived from New York, in May, 1947, we checked our common recollections against the strictly contemporary entries in Anita's diary. I quote what passages I deem pertinent, either because they bear directly on the birth of the Revolution series, or because they help visualize the circumstances surrounding it: The entries start at the end of Orozco's long wait before he could resume his mural work at the school.

"December 14, 1925. Orozco to lunch. . . . Hopes to finish his Preparatoria frescoes and may do some oil work and lithographs."

"January 26, 1926. Clémente Orozco has the Preparatoria back. He is mad with joy."

"February 9. Saw Orozco. Went over Preparatoria with him about photos. He begins to paint tomorrow."

"May 2. Went out this morning to Orozco's studio with Edward Weston. Edward made some portraits of him. Orozco showed us some of his old things and a few studies for the frescoes he is doing. . . . The frescoes he is doing now is revolution stuff. On a background of ultra blue, swift volumes of gray—swirling hurried skirts of women, tramp of guaraches, guns, and rose-colored city walls— . . ."

"May 26. José Clemente Orozco in very good mood. He is working very hard he says. Wants to do 'fresco' on cement: entirely new procedure and it means new aesthetic, technique, values, everything. He says it will be '*horrible de tan fuerte*'."

"July 24. Saturday. Came José Clemente *con mucha buena voluntad* and talking through his teeth of how sick he is of being bothered at the Preparatoria. The boys make quite a fuss pro and con."

"Tuesday August 17. José Clemente brought some old newspaper clippings in which he is called many vile names. 'Shortsighted, sentimental, psychologically blunted, romantic, unformed, cartoonist, critic reformer, impotent, lascivious, frustrated, can't draw, etc. etc.' Session of raucous laughter."

"Monday, September 6. Saw Orozco. He says he is all mixed up and does not know what's what in painting. He has been quite ill. He suffers a great deal but he is doing beautiful work. I am going to get him to do a group of revolutionary drawings. Pretext of customer—He wouldn't sell to me."

"Sunday September 12. This morning went to see José Clemente. He has been told that there is no more money in the University to keep on painting with, and therefore the work at the Prep, which is going so splendidly, must stop. . . . He painted a picture to put in the book [the future *Idols Behind Altars*] a scene of the revolution. It is a palette of four colors, black, white, burnt sienna, and natural yellow. They are *tierras*—that is corresponds to what

he has been doing in fresco. With the black and white he gets a fine dull blue. The whole thing is rich and full of emotion."

"September 15. Went to Universal to take an article about Orozco, hoping thus to raise some dust about this ridiculous business of stopping his work. Have already gone to see Jimmy (Puig's secretary) about it and wrote also a spectacular letter to Pruneda."

I now quote from the carbon copy of the letter:

"Sr. Doctor Alfonso Pruneda, Rector de la Universidad Nacional de Mexico. . . . I further wish to bring to your attention the unexplained stoppage of the work of José Clemente Orozco who wields, as you know, one of the greatest among the brushes of which Mexico may pride itself. Furthermore, the work that he is now executing is of deep value, as it means, for me and for all who see it, the true aesthetic of the Revolution. I have seen his projects for the lower floor, that is now nearly the only missing stretch, and those plans, seen under such circumstances, have moved me to carry before you this protest, with which you will doubtless identify yourself, given your good judgment in such matters. I repeat that it would be an attempt against Mexico's honor to allow that, for obscure reasons that can surely be mended, this work be stopped at its emotional and technical climax. . . ."

Further diary entries:

"September 18, 1926. Only incident of importance was an interview with Dr. Pruneda about Orozco. He said that it was all right and that he had no intention of letting the work be stopped. That as further proof of his interest, I could tell Orozco that next year he would be put 'where nobody could touch him'—in the official budget as a decorator of the Prep. . . ."

"Sunday, September 19. Had lunch at Orozco's. . . . In the two first of the series of scenes of the revolution bought by a fictitious American—he came to a fusion of the grandiosity of his frescoes and the intimate curtness of his drawings. I am trying to persuade him to do enough for an exhibition. He rather fears the effect. I told him Goya was an antecedent and he says: 'But Goya is superficial. He draws carefully. He hasn't my monstrosity—nor the reality.' He speaks of striving for less motion and emotion now as a thing of 'good health.' . . . He has begun using abstract planes, semi-architecturally incorporated, to splendid effect in both fresco and small stuff."

The comparison with Goya's *Desastres de la Guerra* imposed itself, and the budding series was informally baptized *Los Horrores de la Revolucion*.

"Monday, September 20. Went and phoned Jimmy and was delighted to be told that Orozco is safely arranged."

"Wednesday, September 22. . . . Came also Orozco with another 'horror.'"

"Monday, September 26. In the evening came Orozco with two more 'horrors.' Scenes of the looting army. . . ."

"March 7, 1927. Orozco came in the evening and brought seven of those marvelous ink and wash drawings—revolution stuff. I have never seen anything like it."

"Sunday, March 20. Orozco had four more 'horrors.' That makes twenty-one. . . . Had breakfast at Sanborns with Ella, Lucy and Ernestine Evans. . . . So it is arranged that the opening of the Whitney Club will be with Orozco's things."

"March 22. This evening, Orozco came with four more 'horrors' that makes twenty-five."

"May 26. Orozco came with seven more drawings as usual breathtaking. A new quality of tranquility apparent."

"August 20. Orozco's to lunch. . . . He had two new 'horrors' and also a funny thing called 'Las Delicias del Amor.' . . ."

"Monday, August 21. Orozco told me Atl went to see him and told him that he just had to see those drawings that everyone was talking about and that Orozco told him he would ask me. . . . Until I get those things safely over the border I shan't rest easy."

Remembering that many of the early water colors of Orozco had been destroyed as 'immoral' by the American customs on his 1919 trip to the United States, one understands the note of anxiety on which these excerpts close.

Anita left for New York ^{September 3} August 4, taking with her the bulk of the Revolution set. As she remembers it, "I took the drawings with me to New York, with the idea of getting an exhibition for him. At that time, the Mexican painters were so little known that I got a rather odd reception, and it was pointed out to me that these things weren't really art, they were drawings and cartoons suitable for the New Masses, and I was seriously advised by an art dealer who is now one of the Orozco 'discoverers' to take them to that magazine."

Soon after, Orozco left in turn for New York, with only an overnight bag for luggage and only myself to bid him adieu, and it became my responsibility to choose and take with me what finished works remained in his studio when I left Mexico for New York in October, 1928. A few remaining 'horrors' and large charcoal studies for the frescoes I artfully mingled with my own milder brand of art and all passed the customs unquestioned.

The Revolution drawings were first publicly shown in October, 1928, in New York, at the Marie Sterner Gallery, and first reproduced in their entirety in 1932, in the Delphic Studio monograph edited by Alma Read. There it is stated explicitly that the drawings are not contemporaneous with the events, "Drawings and lithographs from sketches made between 1913 and 1917." Those who know Orozco's lightning way of working believe the purported earlier sketches, never mentioned before or since, never shown, published or seen, to have been rather mental notations.

If the preceding circumstantial recital of facts carries weight, the Revolution series of wash drawings and the few related easel pictures should be advanced from the time of their subject-matter—1913-1917—to the period beginning September, 1926, when the first drawings of the set were commissioned and executed, and ending in the year 1928, when Orozco, working in his little room on West 22nd Street, New York, added a few new subjects and made replicas of some of the early drawings.

Main interest of this rectification will be to free the master's work from the implausible duality of styles implied in the assumption of an overlap in time between the delicate lines and tints of the series on feminine themes and the black-and-white of the Revolution series, both brutal and architectural, that reflects Orozco's growing mural experience in its increased grandeur and assurance.



Sinhalese Devil Mask, 17th Century.
Courtesy Cleveland Institute of Art.

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