TOWARD A PEOPLE'S ART

THE CONTEMPORARY MURAL MOVEMENT

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Foreword by Jean Charlot

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Foreword

How could a foreword written by a veteran of the Mexican mural renaissance add anything worthwhile to this vibrant recital of the present deeds of American muralists? What we wrought in faith and hope happened half a century ago, long before the atom was split or men landed on the moon. Meaning at first to decline, I was genuinely moved, as I scanned these pages, by the undeniable zest of youth, the bloom of surprise at one's own achievements, the articulate faith in a future promising even more than the dynamic present. Such enthusiasm is heady. I accepted the task.

We too started on a crusade bent on toppling ivory towers once and for all. We too disdained the twin myths of personality and art for art. We would, through communal effort, create anonymous masterpieces beamed to the people at large. Selfless workers were we, busy at our self-imposed task, our schedule more exacting than any employer would dare impose, and that for the most meager of reward. Our youthful dread—and, as I gather, yours also—was that, come a potbellied middle age, some of us would weaken, shed anonymity, meekly take their place in the stable of artists of some art dealer.

Your book records the birth of a mural renaissance similar in many ways to ours, dissimilar in its locale, the multiracial Babylons of the United States. In Mexico, in the 1920s, we emerged from within the turmoil of a revolution, ostracized by cultured circles, unnoticed by military chieftains playing a game of musical chairs, its prize the presidential one and, for stakes, their very lives.

We were so few to begin with that, for a roll call of comrades, a finger count sufficed. We were so young that those of us who had reached their thirties received the homage due to age and wisdom. A happy fluke found us facing walls to paint on, the majestic walls of ancient palaces, a task that should have filled us with awe but did not. Up went our scaffolds. Up went masons and painters, troweling, frescoing, desecrating these hallowed places—or so opined men of taste. The revolution, even before the end of the shooting affray, had found its image.

Fifty years later it is bracing to watch a group of men and women, as young, as poor, as dedicated and assured as we were, experiencing for themselves the heady feel of painting murals, on walls far from palatial this time. The scale that these plebeian walls dictate often equals that giant one chosen by Michelangelo for the Sistine Chapel. Instead of serried ranks of red-robed cardinals, your audience is plucked out of milling street crowds, quick to react to what your murals have to say.

The story told in these pages is not yet history. It concerns a renaissance in the making and comes close to being a journal jotted as the work proceeds. How then could the authors attempt to generalize, to summarize, and even less to moralize, things that, as a rule, we expect from histories of art and funeral orations.

Both our groups violently broke loose from orthodox modern styles. In our day that was Cubism. The Mexicans were well versed in it, but a different language had to be forged to plead Mexico's case before the world. It took a touch of heroism to swap the much that Paris had to offer for a totally uncertain future. Our refusal to toe the line angered critics. Adolfo Venturi wrote: "It was unfortunate that 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. Modern art may be symbolized by the picture of apples . . . If you compel a painter to fill some hundreds of feet of wall space with hundreds of figures he cannot find his form as he did after consideration of a single apple."

In truth, in that place and at that time, bullets were of more concern to us than apples. Those who criticize in retrospect our acceptance of official commissions lack in historical perspective. The last official world, that of dictator Porfirio Díaz, had disintegrated. President succeeded president as moving silhouettes in a shooting gallery. If hallowed walls were given to us to do with as we wished, it was in a spirit not unlike that of a chieftain rewarding his ragged troops with villages to sack and women to rape. The few reactionaries still on their feet raged at this desecration of cultural shrines. If Rivera ostentatiously hung from the upright of his scaffold close at hand a pistol in its unbuckled holster, it was no idle gesture.

I now realize that neither one of our mural movements could dissociate itself as thoroughly as it wished from contemporary fashions. Parisian Cubism remains at the core of our murals, its angles softened mostly by the deep respect in which we held the taste of our own brand of street critics, mostly Indian villagers come to the capital to sell their hand-made wares.

The official art you are reacting against is quite unlike the one we knew. New York has now replaced Paris, so it is said, as the navel of the art world. Splashes and blobs are "in." Sophisticated Happenings partake of the ballet. Meant for an even shorter span of life, Jean Tinguely's contraptions self-destruct. This thinning of the boundaries between the fine arts and the performing arts plays a role in your apparently casual concern as regards the preservation of your murals.

As does a time capsule, fine arts are crafted to project into the future. Gothic cathedrals were communal anonymous achievements. Call them propaganda art if you wish, but they were tuned so finely to the concerns of the masses that neighbors, in their desire to partake, harnessed themselves to the wagons that brought tree trunks from the forest, chunks of stone from the quarry, and—the locale being France—casks of wine to cheer the builders. Today the medieval fires of faith are mostly embers, but cathedrals remain as living witnesses to that faith.

A parallel occurs as Mexican murals enter history in their turn.

Present-day Mexico, oil rich and politically stable, could easily look with disdain on the Mexico we knew and loved, crisscrossed by illiterate chieftains leading unwashed peasants to slaughter. Were it not that our painted walls document this yearning for justice that made today's Mexico a reality.

Clear though your motives are to yourselves, a time may come when onlookers will have lost the key to their meaning. For the very reason that your murals document strictly contemporary attitudes, they deserve to last and enter history, as medieval shrines did, as Mexican murals do.

JEAN CHARLOT