

Mexican Muralists and the Mexican Revolution

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The Mexican Muralists - Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros - were not "...artistically nor intellectually isolated from Mexican society." They were part and parcel of the revolutionary life of Mexico just after the 1910-17 nationalist revolution. They were each essentially different, yet all three dominated the nature of the movement.

They were products of the "Porfiriato", the pre-revolutionary society that flourished under the 30 year dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz whose administration crumbled from within in 1911 and who then fled to Europe. It is interesting to note that he returned from exile in the 30's to convince Mexico to join Hitler's followers. Mexico rejected him. However, the years following the fall of the Porfiriato was marked with revolution and chaos.

Out of this revolutionary chaos emerged the school of Mexican modernism "... amongst whom was Diego Rivera, (who) took a stand against the analytical and objective realism which they saw as a reflection of the prevailing ruling ideology of scientific positivism of the Diaz dictatorship...". The group had been born partly from the exhibition of Dr. Atl, a fascinating figure who traveled through Europe and returned to Mexico in 1903 pushing the idea of the Italian renaissance mural.

Orozco joined with Atl in his Centro Artistico (Artistic Center) which looked for walls of public buildings on which to paint murals. Then came José Vasconcelas. "As one of the major intellectuals of Mexico's revolutionary cultural renaissance, Vasconcelos became one of its key inspirational figures". Like Roy Stryker and the Farm Service Administration in the development of American photography; Vasconcelos also made his openness of vision and fine eye do the really important action that makes art. He funded it.

In 1920 under General Obregón, he became Rector of the National University and announced his intention to bring the revolution to education. In 1921 he became Secretary of State for Public Education. He funded books in a nation of illiterates and non-readers. He found funds and made jobs to fit the needs of the muralists in a country hardly noted for leadership in the visual arts. He was noted for his "cunning and daring with his philosophic idealism...". He hid the funds given to painters under titles that were more easily acceptable to the public. "Siqueiros for example, was appointed to the position of Eighth Teacher of Drawing and Manual Crafts, with a salary of 3.30 pesos per day, while Jean Charlot recalled that Vasconcelos employed him to assist Diego Rivera on his first mural under the guise of Inspector of Drawing in the Public Schools of Mexico City Transferred to the Jurisdiction the Ministry of Public Education."

Diego Rivera stands out, especially in the 20's and 30's for his murals in Mexico and in the US, some of which are at Dartmouth and The New School for Social Research. One in Rockefeller Center was destroyed because the same John D. Robber Baron who had commissioned Diego Rivera discovered that Lenin was a central figure (Surprise!) and destroyed the work.

The most amazing part of this history/ art book is the incredible number and richness of the reproductions. We grew up and were educated at a time when \$100 would buy a few, poor color reproductions. In this book from Amazon for \$18.87, there are an immense number of amazingly good color reproductions of the works and their architectural installations as well as some fine historical photos from the revolutionary period. One favorite of ours is on page 62, plate 54, Wall Street Banquet, 1928 by Diego Rivera from the Courtyard of the Fiestas, Ministry of Education, Mexico City. John D. and Henry Ford and J.P. Morgan and a 20's woman read a snake-like ticker tape, sip champagne behind a statue of liberty and are dwarfed by a bank vault. In plate 58, Night of the Rich from the same building; the rich sip champagne in a drunken orgy, a Diego Rivera self-portrait (He is often encountered as was Hitchcock in his work) smiles at a Mr. Moneybags and, in the background; the revolutionaries gather with their guns and bandoliers. It is Mexico.

Siqueiros paints on into the 70's and adds his works to architecture in a manner that makes both the work and the building become one. He hits the "modern" bell with his The New Democracy, 1944-45 in the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City. It is based on photographic studies of his wife, Angelica Arenal de Siqueiros, bare-breasted and straining against the chains that would deny freedom, all human and mechanistic and emotional in grand size and design. (plate 210, double page).

Even living in Mexico, my heart does not allow me to the altitude of Mexico City to see these murals in reality; but this wonderful book has become a daily, shared exploration of intricate and complicated murals and history that is Mexico and is..."central to the issues that surround the contemporary North American cultural phenomenon of diversity and difference. The murals represent a people's roots, their ethnicity, their shared sense of origin, in which the examination and re-appropriation of history can focus on the struggle for freedom, liberty, justice and, above all, identity."

It is an incredible book worthy of study, reading and rereading, looking and looking again. Mexico, for all its corruption and violence; is also a repository of great muralists, a history of revolutionary culture and its' wonderful mix of peoples and ideas. It, too, is worthy of study, looking and more looking, then some more study since it, like the muralists paintings; is so much more that it seems at first.

Visit my Photoblog: Laguna Bacalar and Beyond and the Site: Beyond Cancun for a number of pictures of local folk art wall paintings that act as graffiti, advertising, signals for the semi-literate, and just exuberant use of color and image in the Mexican world. The muralist notion stays in the smallest towns with and without talent.

Howard writes on science, books, movies and news for Blogcritics and on his own blogs from the border of North and Central America.