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David Alfaro Siqueiros: *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* (detail). Pyrozatine on cement, 1939–40. Mexican Electricians' Syndicate, Mexico City.

FIVE

THE TECHNOLOGY OF UTOPIA

VISIONS OF MODERNITY

The concluding sections of the great historical cycles that Orozco and Rivera painted during the 1930s preceded and anticipated a series of other cycles painted during the same decade, which further extended their involvement with the theme of modernity. For Rivera, this took place in a series of murals derived explicitly from his experience of the United States, in which the image of the modern industrial and political world of North America became the basis for much of his subject-matter. By contrast, Orozco's Mexican and North American murals of this period described the modern industrial world in a different way. As in the concluding panel at Dartmouth, the world of industrial and technological modernity was represented in a pictorial discourse with a moral and judgmental thrust, often harsh, deeply sombre and pessimistic. In some of Orozco's murals, the social background of Mexico provided the context in which Orozco engaged with the moral and political dilemmas posed by the modern world. In others, he created a more generalized image of a mechanical and industrial reality enmeshing, incarcerating and imprisoning humanity.

For Siqueiros, the modern world proved to be the catalyst for an engagement with new methods of production, like capitalist industry itself, as well as providing the thematic background for his continuous preoccupation with revolutionary struggle. His methodology for producing murals added a further dimension to the character of Mexico's public art.

Although the concept of modernity was not perceived by the three muralists as an exclusively American phenomenon, as the most advanced and technologically powerful society and one of which they had first-hand experience, the industrial and political culture of America contributed significantly to their thematic and visual vocabulary. Between the early 1920s and the late 1930s, North American industrial society was transformed. The collapse of the optimistic decade of the 1920s and the tragic years that followed the Depression affected the lives and thinking of everyone living through those times. Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros spent significant periods of time in the United States during these years, and were profoundly influenced by the contrasting realities of the world's richest and most advanced industrial society.

American capitalist society had been characterized by enormous economic progress during the 1920s. By 1929, its industry had moved towards the mass production of consumer items. Its factories poured out enormous numbers of cars and electrical appliances of every variety, with industrial output doubling during the decade. The unparalleled wealth, economic growth and faith in American capitalism during the 1920s was shattered by the Depression. In March 1929 Herbert Hoover was elected President of the United States with the campaign promise of 'Two cars for every garage'; years later, Harry Truman remarked that Hoover really meant 'two families for every garage'. Eight months later, the great Wall Street crash occurred, provoking the collapse of the world's strongest economy. Although the

greatest single losses were experienced by those holding stock, all Americans were affected, with the industrial worker, the farmer and the small businessman suffering most. By 1933, unemployment had reached the staggering figure of 25 per cent. In the countryside, droughts throughout nearly all the major farming areas of the mid-United States led to the dust bowl. Already crippled by the economic depression, farmers could no longer earn a living from the land and were unable to service their debts which forced them to leave their farms. In both city and country, poverty, starvation and financial ruin were realities. Not surprisingly, American society as a whole lost faith in capitalism. No longer able to make even a basic livelihood within the capitalist economy, the American industrial worker turned increasingly to protest, strike and the politics of the radical left. American intellectuals turned increasingly towards Marxism and Communism as the crisis in American capitalism took its toll on society.

Optimism, growth, wealth and personal prosperity, followed by depression, unemployment, financial ruin and abject poverty for millions were the two alternative realities presented by modern North American industrial society. Although profoundly different in character from the United States, Mexico was also characterized by two contrasting realities during these years. Still largely an agrarian country, Mexico was influenced less by the total collapse of American industry than by the corruption of the revolutionary agendas that had stimulated the political and social dynamism of the early 1920s. By the early years of the 1930s, the spirit of the revolution had become a lifeless façade. Rhetoric and the pursuit of power had become concentrated within an increasingly centralized political authority marred by corruption. Up until 1934, Mexican politics were to all intents and purposes controlled by Plutarco Elías Calles, who was elected President in 1924. *Caudillismo* (rule by political bosses) once again took its place in the political culture, enforcing an authority sanctioned only by a belief in the myth of revolutionary legitimacy.

Although Calles completed his presidential term in 1928, by then he had amended the constitution drawn up during the revolution to allow his colleague and former president, Obregón, to succeed him for a second term. Both men believed in strong government, and had concluded that the best way of consolidating the gains of the revolution was to create an unofficial dynasty whereby Calles and Obregón would alternate in office at regular four-year intervals.[1] However, such plans came undone when Obregón was assassinated three weeks after his re-election. Although the Mexican constitution prevented Calles from being re-elected immediately to office, he nevertheless wielded enormous power and influence from behind the scenes. A succession of puppet governments ruled Mexico from 1928 to 1934. Although Emilio Portes Gil (1928–30) made some attempt to continue the spirit of revolutionary reform, subsequent presidents halted such activities. Pascual Ortíz Rubio, who was ruled by the influence of Calles, was unceremoniously driven from office in 1932 for considering policies independent from those envisaged by his mentor. The third president, General Abelardo Rodríguez, was part of a circle of people who had made their fortune out of the revolution, and flaunted his wealth with huge houses.

> Calles himself, during this last phase of his influence, had become increasingly conservative in his political ideas. . . . (He) became disillusioned with the poor economic results of the agrarian programme, and virtually put a stop to the distribution of the land. The one-time socialist now saw the country in terms of industrial development, which in alliance with local and foreign capital he did his best to foster.[2]

By the mid-1930s, however, the wheel of politics had turned full circle. In place of the betrayal that scarred Mexican politics in the early 1930s, under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40) the second half of the decade saw the restoration of at least some faith in the revolutionary process. By the end of the decade, however, the world had been plunged into conflict.

The visions of the modern world created by Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros between 1930 and 1940 were located within these contrasting realities. For Siqueiros, they formed the basis for a deeply partisan reading of the modern world. In Orozco's case, the contrasts often formed the premise for a judgmental interrogation of the conflict between the ideal and reality. In Rivera's work, the dualities of the modern world were treated to a conflicting combination of positions, either in an uncritical mythologized vision of American modernity or through the rhetoric of his revolutionary socialism.

Rivera spent four years in the United States from late 1930 until 1934 and was the first of the three muralists to portray the modern industrial world of North America. He had been known to some Americans as early as 1915, when Maria de Zayas' small gallery on Fifth Avenue in New York had exhibited a number of his European *pointillist* landscape paintings. In 1924 his reputation in the United States took root as news of his mural work at the Ministry of Education in Mexico City began to spread northwards. The press began to write about Rivera and collectors began to buy his work. In 1929 the American Institute of Architects awarded him the Fine Arts' gold medal in recognition of his fresco work. By the end of 1930 his position as Mexico's leading painter had been assured as far as the Mexican establishment was concerned. This had been underlined by his appointment in 1929 as Director of the Academy of San Carlos with an offer from President Portes Gil to create a post for him in the cabinet.[3] Having been expelled from the Mexican Communist Party in 1929 for his refusal to join political demonstrations against the government and for accepting the directorship of the Academy, Rivera became the target of virulent criticism from former comrades and fellow artists for being, among other things, a 'false revolutionist' and a 'millionaire artist for the establishment'. Abroad, however, Rivera's reputation was decidedly different. In the United States his image was that of a radical Marxist painter, whose work was rooted in depictions of agrarian and proletarian revolution and national anti-imperialist history. When he arrived in the United States in late 1930, Rivera's reputation as the leading exponent of Mexican muralism was therefore well established.

The images that Rivera created while he was in the United States gave rise to highly contradictory visions of the character of modern industrial culture. In large measure much of the spirit of the murals contrasts strongly with the realities of the time, which so closely informed the rhetoric of his own publicly displayed political ideology. Yet in truth Rivera's own position was one of ideological and political contradiction, of strange contrasts. Indeed, there was some irony in that it was capitalist and corporate America that extended the hand of invitation to the erstwhile communist painter to travel north to paint murals, an irony reinforced by the glad acceptance of the invitation.[4]

However, if Rivera's position at this time was one of contrasts and contradictions, then it was no more so than the character of the capitalist modernity that he went north to paint. The country that Rivera portrayed when he was in California and Detroit in the early 1930s was one characterized primarily by the utopian mirage of the 'roaring twenties' and its claim to a society abundant with opportunities, prosperity and material well-being. For Rivera and, indeed, the Marxist socialists with whom he claimed allegiance, the idea of the proletariat ruling and controlling the development of modern technological means of production in order to create a society of abundance and freedom was also a utopian concept. Although they took radically different ideological positions concerning the nature of society, both the proponents of the American dream and those of revolutionary socialism nevertheless shared a belief in the attainability of their ideal. For the American dreamers, the 1920s signified the ideal in the process of becoming a reality. For the revolutionary socialists, the crisis and collapse of industrial capitalism in the 1930s confirmed their belief that the basis for the revolutionary transformation of society had arrived.

With his own penchant for utopian visions, Rivera was captivated simultaneously by the American dream of an abundant mass-producing capitalism in the making, and by socialism's claim to the attainability of a new revolutionary society. Indeed, he seemed to see the former as displaying what the latter would more fairly control and distribute in the future. He was thus able to identify with both ideological positions, as far as is implied through his use and choice of subject-matter.

The pictures that Rivera constructed were for the most part not the gritty realities of ash-can realism, but the romantic visions that had informed so much of his painting in the previous decade, whether it had been his poetic images of the Mexican revolution or the political mythology that he had woven in his visual tapestry of Mexico's national identity on the walls of the National Palace in Mexico City.

Rivera's first mural in the United States at the San Francisco Stock Exchange was typical of this position. Entitled *Allegory of California*, the mural was painted on the main wall of the stairwell leading to the Luncheon Club of the exchange. The origins of

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Diego Rivera: *Allegory of California*. Fresco, 1931. The Stock Exchange Tower, San Francisco, California.

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Diego Rivera: *The Making of a Fresco, showing the Building of a City*. Fresco, 1931. San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, California.

the work dated back to 1926 when Ralph Stackpole, a San Francisco-based sculptor who had known Rivera in Paris, returned to San Francisco from Mexico. While in Mexico he acquired two of Rivera's paintings and had seen his work at the Ministry of Education in Mexico City. In 1929 Stackpole, who had been engaged as a sculptor on the decoration of the stock exchange building, persuaded Timothy Pflueger, the building's architect, to offer Rivera a wall for a mural project. Following an agreement on price and with assistance from William Gerstle, the President of the San Franciscan Art Commission, who had facilitated the arrangements for Rivera to travel to San Francisco, Rivera accepted the offer and arrived with his wife, the painter Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) in November the following year.

Rivera executed the Luncheon Club mural with a prodigious display of energy. Beginning in December 1930, he managed to complete the large, 44-metre-square fresco by the middle of February 1931. The central feature of the mural is an enormous portrait of the tennis star, Helen Wills Moody. Young, energetic and attractive, Moody epitomized for Rivera the essence of California which he stated he wished to represent 'with the three bastions of her richness, gold, petroleum, and fruits. Transportation, rail and marine will be motifs stressed, and on the ceiling, energy and speed.'[5] In a reworking of the motif he had originally intended to use at the top of the central arch of his fresco in the National Palace in Mexico City but which he had abandoned in favour of a depiction of revolutionary leaders, Rivera portrayed Moody on the main wall of the stairwell site of the stock exchange. She appears as an earth-mother figure gathering around her the human and natural fruits of the land, seen in front of a landscape dominated by scenes of industry. Below are images of industrial workers and the technicians of modern industry in the state of California, while in the centre Rivera portrayed a young man 'as a symbol of the future . . . facing the sky with a model aeroplane in his hand'.[6]

Rivera's mural at the stock exchange reflects the very obvious excitement that he felt at being in a modern industrialized country. In the panel *Wall Street Banquet* that he had painted on the third floor of the Ministry of Education in 1927, Rivera had depicted the representatives of American capitalism in a highly satirical manner. In San Francisco, while the different aspects of Californian working class are centrally depicted, there is no hint of a critique of the system in which they work. Indeed, the opposite seems to occur, for there is a strong sense of celebration of the productive and creative abundance of the system in which the labourers are engaged. Readings of the mural at the time it was painted underline the utopian aspect of Rivera's image. Emily Joseph, who translated for Rivera, wrote that

> the significance of the Californian mural is plain. The heroic figure of California, the mother, the giver is dominant. She gives gold and fruit and grain. California and her riches are here for all. Without the genius of her own sons, her riches would be a dead matter. Under the earth, over the earth, and above the earth, man's will and spirit transform gold, wood, metal into gods that are to liberate the life of man. The idea of liberation is involved in the entire fresco.[7]

The spirit of the stock exchange mural was clearly emulated in Rivera's second San Francisco mural, painted at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute). He completed this at the beginning of June 1931, after just five weeks of work.[8] The fresco is a pictorial trinity of construction, with a rear-view image of Rivera occupying the centre of the mural. Next to him are his assistants. They are pictured on scaffolding painting a huge mural picturing a construction worker who is surrounded by other images representing the construction of a modern industrial city.[9]

There is no hint of political critique in this mural either. It is worth noting that the Acquisitions Committee of the San Francisco Art Association wanted no part in a political mural. In a letter to William Gerstle, Spencer Macky, Director of the Association, wrote 'The character of the mural might have a very wide choice of subject matter – anything but of a political nature – of course suitable for an art institution.'[10] Although not a particularly significant mural by the standards of Rivera's previous achievements – its composition is stilted and awkward, the figures more mannequin than human – nevertheless it contributes to the overall picture of Rivera's artistic thesis of American industrial modernity. Although the rhetoric of celebration is more muted and distant than at the stock exchange, it clearly echoes the enthusiastic public statements Rivera had made about the industrial modernity of American society. In 1931, for example, he had written 'Become aware of the splendid beauty of your factories, admit the charm of your native houses, the luster of your metals, the clarity of your glass. . . .'[11] Like the stock exchange fresco, the mural seems to affirm the optimistic industrial spirit of America, and excludes any wish to express the

uncomfortable realities of Californian society in the early 1930s. Like some latter-day re-creation of the spirit of the Italian renaissance, the work depicts a world awash with architectural, constructive and scientific enterprise. The dominating compositional device of the builders' scaffold spreads across the whole surface of the mural, conveniently framing every sub-plot of activity and lifting the eye up towards the triangular apex of the wall where the wood colouring of the scaffold poles seems to become part of the actual wooden timber rafts of the studio's roof. The spirit of the mural could not contrast more strongly with the monumental and tragic scene of *Exit From the Mine*, which Rivera had painted earlier in the Ministry of Education's Courtyard of Labour in Mexico City. There, the dark background, the strong artificial foreground light and the crucifixion stance of the miner spoke of the tragedy and bitter exploitation of man. In the Art Institute mural in San Francisco all appears as a collective and equal endeavour towards some magnificent constructive cause.

Both San Francisco murals clearly reflect Rivera's enthusiasm for a truly modernized industrial culture, in this case the United States. Significantly, there is an absence of concern for the origins and identity of his own country, despite the obvious connections that Mexico had with the south-west of the United States. Nor is there any trace of the anti-colonialist sentiments embedded so firmly in his two cycles on the history of Mexico, and which he might have expected to continue, even if only in a veiled way, in the United States.

Rivera's love affair with the dynamism of modern industrial culture found its most intense reflection in the enormous cycle of frescoes that he undertook in Detroit following those that he painted in San Francisco. The Detroit frescoes undoubtedly represent one of the great peaks of his creative powers. The roots of the commission stemmed directly from a meeting with Dr. William Valentiner, the Director of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), at the behest of their mutual friend Helen Wills Moody, in San Francisco in 1931. Enthused by what he had seen of Rivera, Valentiner returned to Detroit and presented to the Institute's Art Commission, whose chairman was Edsel Ford, president of the Ford motor company, the plan for Rivera to come to Detroit and carry out a fresco commission in the Institute of Art. Valentiner wrote to Rivera saying that the Art Commission had decided to ask him

> to help us beautify the museum and give fame to its hall through your great work. . . . The arts commission will be very glad to have your suggestions of the motifs, which could be selected after you are here. They would be pleased if you could possibly find something out of the history of Detroit, or some motif suggesting the development of the industry of the town; but at the end they decided to leave it entirely to you, what you think best to do.[12]

Rivera arrived in Detroit in April 1932 to undertake the commission, the theme of which was essentially to be of Rivera's choice. He began his frescoes on 25 July 1932, completing the work less than a year later. Although not without their fair share of controversy (*The Detroit News* of 18 March 1933 ran an editorial calling for the entire cycle to be whitewashed), the frescoes reinforced still further his public reputation.[13]

The city that Rivera portrayed in his fresco cycle was a great industrial complex, which by the late 1920s had become the largest and most technically advanced in the world. By 1927, Ford had introduced his revolutionary automated car-assembly line at the Rouge. This industrial city within Detroit contained all the manufacturing elements for the production of the motor car, including factories producing steel, cement, glass and electrical power. The company also developed ship, tractor and aeroplane manufacture, and owned all the rail and shipping. It was, in short, a vast integrated industrial production centre that had no equal anywhere else in the world. It was this that Rivera sought to depict. He spent nearly three months preparing drawings and sketches for the frescoes. He toured all the plants, making hundreds of drawings and studies for his various scenes. With these and the many photographs taken for him by the company's official photographer, W. J. Stettler, Rivera built up a series of stunning images that gradually dominated the baroque inner courtyard of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

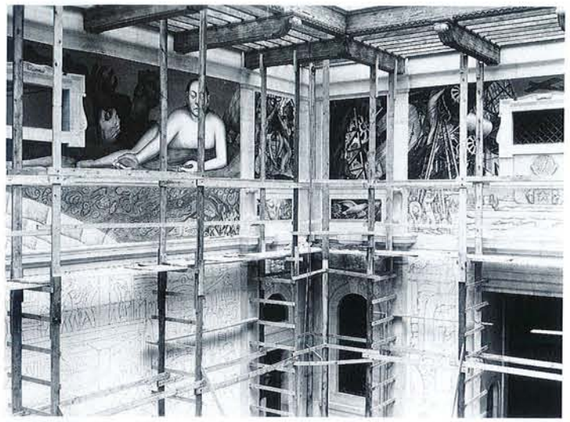
The cycle in the museum's inner courtyard is dominated by two huge central panels on the south and north walls. These are the orchestrated climax to Rivera's vision of industrial production. The north wall depicts the construction of the interior of the automobile, with specific reference to Ford's famous 1932 V8

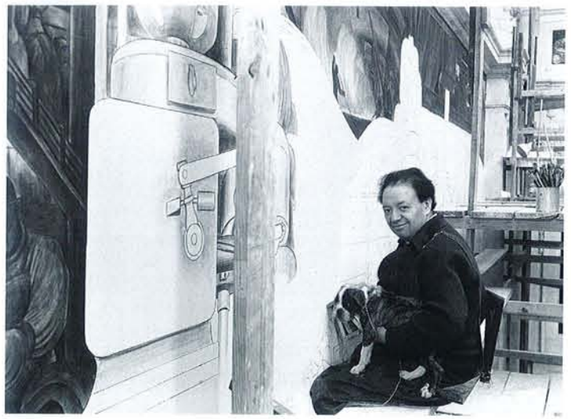
134 *top left*
South-east corner of the south wall with scaffolding in place during the painting of the Detroit fresco.

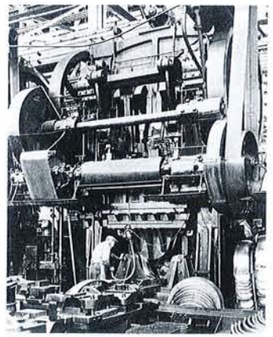
135 *bottom left*
Rivera posing in front of the north wall at the Detroit Institute of Arts during work on the fresco.

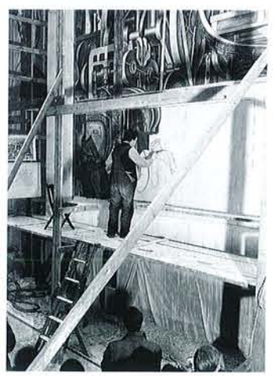
136 *top right*
Documentary photograph of a pressing machine used during work on the Detroit fresco.

137 *bottom right*
Rivera working on the south wall of the Detroit fresco.









engine. Rivera wove all the various elements in this production process into a tight rhythmic composition of human and mechanical movement: blast furnaces making iron ore; foundries in which moulds for the engine blocks were made; conveyor belts carrying casting boxes; drilling operations and gear inspections. Along the bottom of the panel, Rivera represented the different stages of the worker's day in monochrome, in the manner of an Italian fresco. In the large panel opposite on the south wall,

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Diego Rivera: *Detroit Industry*.
Fresco, 1933. Detroit Institute of
Arts, north wall, Detroit, Michigan.

Rivera showed the manufacture of the exterior of the motor car. The great body-pressing machine is shown here among the gears and engines and seems to echo in its configuration the outline of Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess.

Following his customary approach to narrative, Rivera placed these main panels, which were the centre of this theme, among other images showing the human and physical origins from which they sprang. On the east wall, a foetus lying in the soil suggests the origins of life. On the large south and north walls, figures of different races inhabiting the American continent are seen with pictures of the substrata beneath the Detroit landscape. Early agriculture gives way to images of industries in Detroit other than those of automobile construction, such as aircraft manufacture. Rivera contrasts their positive and negative aspects: on the left-hand side of the north wall, the chemical industry is shown producing gas for warfare; on the right-hand side, its positive and peaceful face is shown in the production and distribution of vaccines for medical purposes.

The cycle of frescoes were unveiled on 13 March 1933. Rivera managed to complete the monumental and complex work in the unbelievably short time of under eight months. His daily work schedule had been punishing; he had driven himself and his assistants to near exhaustion, often working up to fifteen hours a day.[14]

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Diego Rivera: *Detroit Industry*.
Fresco, 1932–3. Detroit Institute of
Arts, south wall, Detroit, Michigan.

Despite Rivera's largely celebratory and uncritical vision of modern industrial production, the Detroit frescoes did not escape controversy. Criticism centred on religious grounds in the case of the panel depicting the vaccination of the child on the right-hand side of the north wall. The public outcry against this scene was orchestrated by the Reverend Ralph Higgins, a local church leader who objected to the panel on the grounds that it showed 'a fat ugly child, flanked by a nurse and a physician who are engaged in vaccinating the infant. The composition of the portrait', Higgins continued, 'together with animals in the foreground and the golden halo about the child's head combine to suggest strikingly the Holy family.'[15] Another critic, Eugene Paulus of Loyola University in Los Angeles, considered the panel implied that science would triumph over religion, and accused Rivera of symbolizing religion as 'a great burden on the backs of the people.'[16]

The great paradox of the Detroit murals is embedded in what was an essential dimension of the discourse of Rivera's very public murals during this period of his life, that is, the fracture between the expressive ideal and an all-too-painful social reality. He was fascinated by the genius of organization and the immense productive power of capitalist industry and its modern technology. Clearly the manufacturing industries of Detroit and the new industrial workers employed by them represented for

Rivera, even more closely than the reality that he had confronted in California, the foundations of a great new industrial culture. He painted men and machines as a gigantic symphony, a harmonious synthesis of human and mechanical action, which together represented a potential creative power unparalleled in history. Indeed, in a comment which seemed to imply a belief in the vision of modern capitalist production as the realization of the means to a new society, he described Detroit's use and production of steel as 'the means of a true revolution in modern life all over the world'.[17]

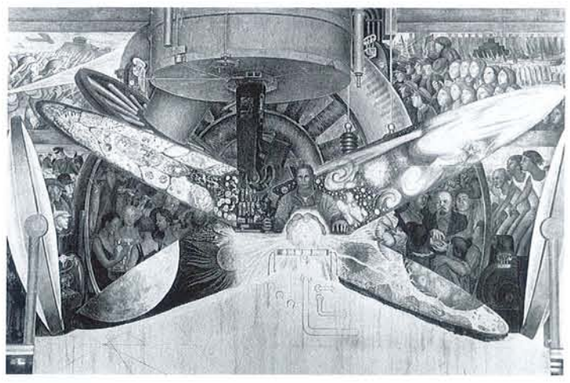
But if this is how Rivera saw industrial Detroit, the day-to-day realities of the life of Detroit's working masses were frighteningly at odds with the utopian vision. E. P. Richardson, the Education Director at the DIA at this time, wrote that Detroit was 'a disaster such as none could have conceived. . . . it was a terrible human situation we were living in while the fresco was going forward – the whole world was collapsing around us'.[18] Detroit in 1932 was a city riddled with gangsters, racism and virulent anti-communism. There was widespread unemployment, and production at Ford was only a fifth of what it had been in 1929. Strikes, soup kitchens and bread lines were a daily reality, and the Ford company's antagonism to organized labour had been well summed up in Henry Ford's dictum 'people are never so likely to be wrong as when they are organized'.[19]

Only a few weeks before Rivera's arrival in Detroit, the city had witnessed a communist-organized hunger strike of 3,000 people at the Ford company's Rouge plant. The demonstration ended in a violent confrontation with the police, in which three people were killed and many more injured and hospitalized. There is no hint of this reality in Rivera's fresco cycle. Indeed, the only slogan in the whole work, 'we want', which is barely visible on the worker's hat in the centre left area of the large centre panel on the south wall, refers to the famous cry of the time, 'We want beer', which was aimed at the repeal of the prohibition laws.

Instead of portraying a fertile political terrain on which Rivera's publicly expressed Marxism might have been expected to bear fruit, he chose to depict a vision of an industrial Detroit unscarred by the onset of the great Depression. The frescoes powerfully reflect upon the synthetic mix of a once real and very dynamic reality and a utopian and mythogenic vision of limitless growth, production and prosperity.

In 1932, only a few months after he had started work on the Detroit frescoes, Rivera, along with Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, was approached by John R. Todd, the official architect of the new Rockefeller Centre, which was undergoing construction in Manhattan, New York, to consider undertaking mural commissions for the building. In October that year, Rockefeller was told that Matisse had declined the approach, suggesting that his work would not be seen to best advantage in the building, and that Picasso had also declined. The Rockefellers, however, had been patrons of Rivera for some time. As early as 1930, Mrs. John D. Rockefeller had joined forces with other eminent, wealthy Americans to form the Mexican Arts Association in order to 'promote friendship between the people of Mexico and the United States by encouraging cultural relations and the interchange of fine and applied art'. At the first meeting, Rivera was chosen as the most suitable artist for the association's widely publicized cultural promotion exercise. In 1931, Frances Flynn Paine, an art dealer and advisor to the Rockefellers and a member of the Mexican Arts Association, visited Rivera in Mexico while he was engaged in painting the National Palace fresco to suggest a retrospective of his work take place at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The Rockefellers had also expressed an interest in Rivera coming to the United States to undertake a mural commission prior to the Rockefeller Centre project. Indeed, in 1931, Mrs. John Rockefeller had suggested that Rivera be invited to paint the mural at Dartmouth College that Orozco eventually executed.

Although keen to commission Rivera, the negotiations were fraught with difficulty. Rivera initially refused to participate in what he interpreted as a competition, and only accepted the commission after the personal intervention of Nelson Rockefeller, and then only after he had secured agreement that the mural be carried out in fresco and in colour, and not as the architects had originally stipulated, a painting in monochrome on canvas.[20] The theme set by Rockefeller was absolute and precise. Its title was *Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future*. For Rivera's rich American patron, the mural's content was first and foremost to be



140 & 141
Diego Rivera: *Man at the Crossroads*. Fresco, 1933. These two photographs were taken at the time when Rivera was dismissed from the Rockefeller Center, and before the mural was destroyed. Rockefeller Center, New York.

philosophical and spiritual, to persuade people to stop and think, above all to stimulate a spiritual awakening.[21]

The portentousness of Rockefeller's own vision of the mural did not seem at the outset to present Rivera with any particular problem. Rivera had written that his mural would show 'Workers arriving at a true understanding of their rights regarding the means of production, which has resulted in the planning of the liquidation of Tyranny. . . . It will also show the Workers of the cities and the country inheriting the Earth. This is expressed by the placing of the hands of the producers in the gesture of possession over a map of the world. . . .'[22] In short, the mural was to be a eulogy to revolutionary socialism. What pushed Rivera towards a more overt display of his celebrated public Marxism, in contrast to its absence or at least the muting of it at Detroit and San Francisco, can be understood by reference to the position he found himself in during this time. Criticized by former comrades in the communist movement as an opportunist painter for millionaires, Rivera saw the Rockefeller mural as the perfect premise on which to salvage some political integrity and one which would allow him to create a public mural that would, as he put it, 'continue to have aesthetic and social value – when the building eventually passes from the hands of its temporary capitalist owners into those of the free commonwealth of all society'.[23]

Rivera planned his theme from left to right. The left-hand side of the mural was to depict

> human intelligence in possession of the Forces of Nature, expressed by lightning striking off the hand of Jupiter and being transformed into useful electricity that helps to cure man's ills, unites men through radio and television, and furnishes them with light and motive power. Below, the Man of Science presents the scale of Natural Evolution, the understanding of which replaces the Superstitions of the past. This is the frontier of Ethical Evolution.[24]

The right-hand side of the mural was to

> represent the development of the Technical Power of man, my panel will show the Workers arriving at a true understanding of their rights regarding the means of production, which has resulted in the planning of the liquidation of Tyranny personified by the crumbling statue of Caesar, whose head has fallen to the ground.[25]

The central area of the mural was to have an image of a telescope and microscope bringing

> to the vision and understanding of man the most distant celestial bodies. The microscope makes visible and comprehensible to man infinitesimal living organisms, connecting atoms and cells with the astral system. Exactly in the median line, the cosmic energy received by two antennae is conducted to the machinery controlled by the Worker where it is transformed into productive energy.[26]

The design underwent major changes once it was transferred to the wall. The centre of the mural was no longer as Rivera described it. Instead it had been replaced by the single image of a worker. His description of mothers and teachers occupying the left-hand sections between the ellipses was replaced with a scene of a nightclub, which Rivera described as showing the debauched rich. However, it was the area to the right of centre that was to cause the premature ending of the commission and the destruction of the nearly completed mural, for it was here that Rivera placed his now notorious portrait of Lenin. He had written in his notes that

> In the center, Man is expressed in his triple aspect – the Peasant who develops from the Earth the products which are the origin and base of all the riches of mankind, the Worker of the cities who transforms and distributes the raw materials given by the earth, and the Soldier who, under the Ethical Force that produces martyrs in religions and wars, represents Sacrifice.[27]

Neither in these accompanying notes to the final sketch design, nor in the sketch design itself did Rivera indicate that the central figure of this group, the worker leader, would be Lenin. Indeed, the original drawing contained the figure of a worker wearing a cap, his features representing no one in particular.

By mid-1933, when the mural was nearing completion, reports in the newspapers spoke of a red-coloured mural containing communist demonstrations being painted for John D. Rockefeller.[28] As a result of the publicity that the nearly completed mural was receiving, Rockefeller visited the mural site and wrote a letter to Rivera asking him to remove Lenin's portrait

> As much as I dislike to do so I am afraid we must ask you to substitute the face of some unknown man where Lenin's face now appears. . . . You know how enthusiastic I am about the work which you have been doing and that to date we have in no way restricted you in either subject or treatment. I am sure you will understand our feeling in this situation and we will greatly appreciate you making the suggested substitution.[29]

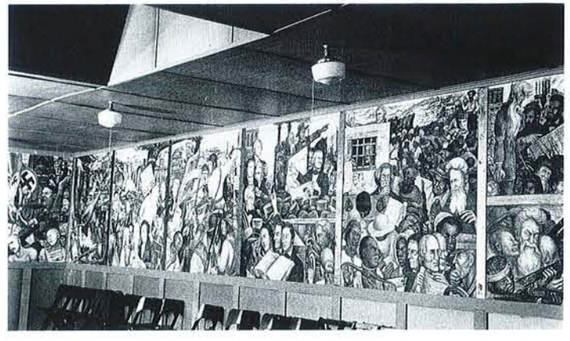
Rivera refused to comply with this polite but firm request, stating in reply that 'rather than mutilate the conception, I should prefer the physical destruction of the composition in its entirety, but preserving, at least, its integrity.'[30]

Rivera, however, underestimated Rockefeller's resolve. On 9 May Rivera was ordered to stop work on the fresco and told to leave the building immediately. The work was then covered over with canvas and on 9 February 1934 the nearly completed mural was chipped off the wall.[31]

Rockefeller paid Rivera's fee of $21,000 in full. With the money left over, Rivera vowed 'to paint in any suitable building that is offered, an exact reproduction of the buried mural. I will paint free of charge except for the actual cost of materials.'[32] With no suitable wall to paint, Rivera instead painted a series of twenty-one small fresco panels entitled *Portrait of America* in the New Workers' School on West 24th Street in New York.

The public rhetoric that Rivera engaged in following the débâcle of the Rockefeller Centre mural was a manifest change to his approach. The public Marxist Rivera came out fighting. In an article in the *Workers' Age*, written a month after his dismissal, he wrote 'those who gave me the work at Radio City knew perfectly well my artistic tendencies and my social and political opinions. . . . As much for my personal opinions as for historical truth, the outstanding leader of the proletariat is Lenin, I could not conceive or represent the figure of the worker leader as any other than that of Lenin.'[33]

The controversy that surrounded the creation of *Man at the Crossroads*, together with the pictorial evidence of the painting itself, obscured Rivera's dilemma as an artist attempting to express what he conceived as the political and social transformations of the modern industrial age. Despite the weight of their



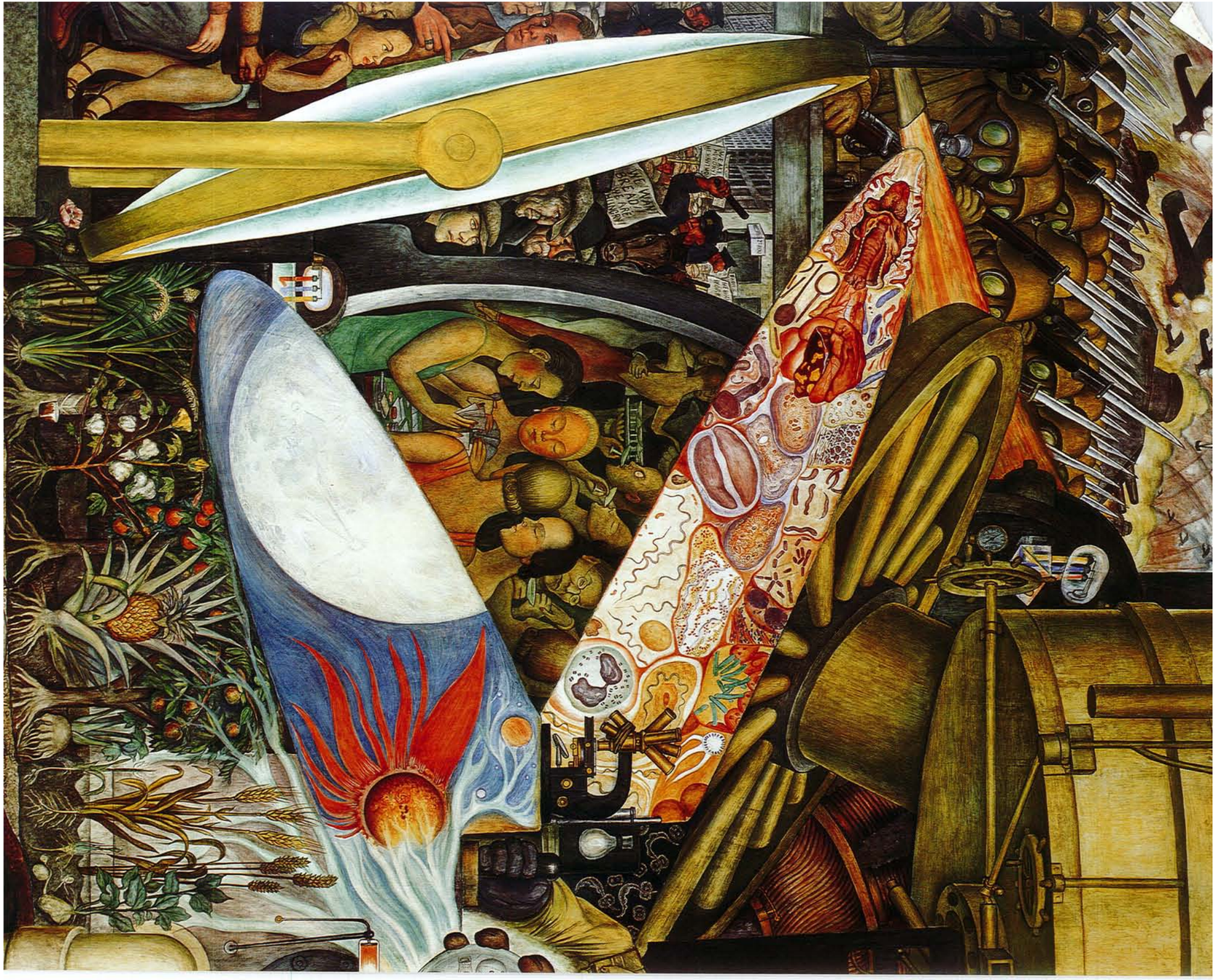
142
Diego Rivera: *Portrait of America*. Fresco, 1933. New Workers' School, New York.

143
Diego Rivera: *Man at the Crossroads*. Fresco, 1934. Palace of Fine Arts, Mexico City.

144 *overleaf*
Diego Rivera: *Man at the Crossroads* (detail). Fresco, 1934. Palace of Fine Arts, Mexico City.

pictorial presence, both the unfinished work and the recreated version in the Palace of Fine Arts, which Rivera painted in 1934 on arriving back in Mexico, were merely rhetorical assertions of faith in the validity of certain assumptions of social change. Like his great work on the history of Mexico in the National Palace, which he still had not completed by the time he left the United States, the Rockefeller mural was the expression of a predetermined idea. Both works were constructed in order to arrive at a particular conclusion. In the former case, it was about the construction of a specific notion of Mexico's national identity, while the latter was about an equally constructed view of capitalism's eventual demise through the inevitable socialist transformation of society.

At Detroit Rivera had sought to express the idea of the seemingly unlimited productive potential of labour power and industrial technology inherent in modern capitalism. In the Rockefeller Centre, on the other hand, he had focused on what he saw as the political consequence of these relations of production. However, it was in this that Rivera confronted his greatest dilemma, for he found that he could say little more about twentieth-century society that would not in the future be seen either as a retreat from his own publicly proclaimed political ideology or as a stale repetition of assertions stemming from that ideology. Now, in the light of recent political events, both the rhetoric and the assumptions seem to have been transformed into hollow myth, no longer even legitimized by widespread belief or faith in the veracity of its claims. Rivera would only succeed in the future by returning to themes that were historical or largely Mexican in orientation. By the end of 1935, having completed the final panel of the National Palace mural, Rivera found himself at a crossroads. His position as the foremost painter of the Mexican mural movement was rapidly being overtaken by José Clemente Orozco. Orozco's ferocious and powerful pessimism provided a dramatic contrast to the lyrical commentary of Rivera's idealistic and mythogenic assertions concerning modern industrial culture and its social reality. Less 'literal' and descriptive, Orozco's work of the 1930s, in which the artist sought to engage with and express the spirit of the modern industrial age, was much more realistically evocative of the painful cultural and social realities of the times, both in his own



STOP
FARMERS'
HOLIDAY

145
José Clemente Orozco: *Catharsis* (detail). Fresco, 1934. Palace of Fine Arts, Mexico City.

country and the world at large. Yet for all the grandiloquent weaknesses of the Rockefeller work and of Rivera's panels in *Portrait of America*, the Detroit frescoes had indeed been a triumph. Rivera's mentor from the time that he spent in Paris, Elie Faure, spoke of 'the poetry of the machine which was born in the frescoes in Mexico and San Francisco dominates those of Detroit: flames escaping from drills, dazzling crackling motors, silent and dancing rhythms of rods and pistons – all these beat the cadences of a new march, the rehearsals of a still hesitant humanity'.[34]

Whereas Rivera's engagement during the 1930s with the presence of modern industrial and political culture in his most successful mural work had often been a poetic, even romantic discourse, Orozco's vision was that of both the agnostic and the atheist. For Orozco, the paradigms of the contemporary world were an encyclopaedic display of entrapment, unfulfilled promise, menace and betrayal. Much less literal in his visual references than Rivera, Orozco nevertheless captured the essence of rupture of the hope that the political, industrial and cultural ideal of modernity offers up to humanity, which humanity destroys in violent conflict.

Unlike Rivera, whose visions of the modern industrial world of the 1930s were predominantly confined to the context of the United States, Orozco's murals during this period were situated in both America and Mexico. Orozco had gone to the United States in 1927. For more than three years, his work as a painter was confined to the easel, to drawing and the lithograph. His experience in the United States clearly influenced his thinking with regard to the concept of a modern culture. In an article published in 1929 he had written

> The art of the New World cannot take root in the old traditions of the Old World, nor in the aboriginal traditions represented by the remains of ancient Indian peoples.... Already the architecture of Manhattan is a new value, something that has nothing to do with the Egyptian pyramids, with Paris Opera, with the Giralda of Seville or with Saint Sofía any more than it has to do with the Maya palaces or Chichén Itzá or with the 'pueblos' of Arizona.[35]

Although by no means his most important works – indeed by the standards of his other murals, they are awkward and rigidly conceived, both compositionally and thematically – the frescoes that Orozco completed in 1931 at the New School for Social Research in New York are perhaps the first example of Orozco engaging in an ideological dialogue with the cosmopolitan modern age using the mural form. The frescoes were painted shortly after he completed his mural at Pomona College in Claremont, California, where he had used the image of Prometheus, the symbol of knowledge bringing fire to mankind. Both the fire and the echoes of this Promethean theme figured prominently throughout the rest of the decade in his murals as telling and evocative images in his powerful vocabulary of commentary on the modern world.

The commission for Orozco to paint murals at the New School for Social Research was gained through his benefactor, Alma Reed, who used her connections with one of the school's instructors, Lewis Mumford, to contact its director, Alvin Johnson. Johnson, who already admired the work of Orozco, agreed to include Orozco in his plans for works of art in the school.[36] The parameters he laid down for the theme and subject-matter of Orozco's mural were to 'work within the framework of contemporary life'.[37] In his later descriptions of the murals, Johnson noted that Orozco 'chose to depict the revolutionary unrest that smolders in the non-industrial periphery, India, Mexico and Russia'.[38] Although the murals are clearly influenced by the thinking of Alma Reed and the Ashram community she had started and to which Orozco belonged, nevertheless they are significant for the way in which Orozco chose to portray the ideologies of modern political discourse. The cycle, painted in a small, low-ceilinged room that is now a classroom, contains panels depicting *The Homecoming of the Worker of the New Day*, *Tale of Brotherhood and Universality*, *Socialism* (Yucatán) and *Communism* (Russia) and *The Orient*; outside in the passageway is the *Allegory of Science and Labour*. None of these panels contains any indication of the characteristically tragic view that appeared in the murals Orozco painted later in the decade. Indeed, for the most part the frescoes are positive, unproblematic portrayals of the principal political and ideological figures of the contemporary world, or equally optimistic renderings of the worker in the modern age. Lenin figures prominently in one mural. In the panel of Mexican socialism, the portrait of Carrillo Puerto almost heroically

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José Clemente Orozco: *Catharsis*.
Fresco, 1934. Palace of Fine Arts,
Mexico City.

dominates a massed group of Mexican peasants, while Indian nationalism is depicted in *The Orient* panel by the figure of Mahatma Gandhi sitting serenely opposite figures representing British colonialism.

Conceived within the rigid framework of Dynamic Symmetry, a compositional theory developed by Jay Hambridge, Orozco's murals were anything but dynamic. In spirit, so unlike his work during the rest of the decade, the New School murals are important for providing an absolute contrast against which to read his later work.

Although Orozco's apocalyptic vision of the modern world with its themes of mechanization and spiritual entrapment, political and moral betrayal, false leadership and blind conflict are contained within his cycle on the history of North American civilization at Dartmouth, the first real hints of his expressive pessimism came not in a mural but in an easel painting of 1931 entitled *The Dead*. The painting's image of a crowded cascade of crumbling modern buildings forms a discursive and aesthetic link between his 1926 fresco panel, *Destruction of the Old Order* at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City, and his devastating 1934 mural *Catharsis*, painted at the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City following his return from the United States. Although the 1926 panel had symbolized the revolutionary demise of the old regime in a compositional montage of collapsed and collapsing classical architecture, its spirit was nevertheless a blend of nostalgia and optimism. By contrast, the easel painting of *The Dead* is a cataclysmic picture of disjointed, fractured buildings crumbling into a dynamic maelstrom, where humanity is conspicuous by its absence.

In *Catharsis*, humanity is present, and its predicament is frighteningly expressed. Using the same axial compositional device as that of the 1931 canvas, and which Orozco evidently employed to express conflict and cataclysm, the fresco depicts a humanity locked into a violent and self-consuming conflict of spiritual entrapment and moral decay. Against a flaming background, at the right-hand side of the composition human beings are portrayed being sucked into a mechanical quicksand. An open safe seems to symbolize theft. A dagger thrust into the back of a man to the hilt speaks of horrifying violence. At the left is an evocative image of a human torso transformed into a monstrous cogwheel leading a heckling mass in an onslaught of murderous intent upon a group of individuals fast disappearing under the weight of this mechanical mass. The centre and foreground are dominated by images of rifles, further self-consuming violence,

and a hysterically laughing, whore-like figure, whose open thighs seem just to have given birth to the monstrous human cogwheel in the upper left portion of the fresco.

Painted as it was so shortly after Orozco's return from the United States, both the spirit and the imagery of this powerful fresco are clearly commentaries on modernity. In the United States, the idea of the modern age had conspicuously brought into the foreground the use and development of industrial production as the generator of prosperity and the fulfilment of human desire. Yet Orozco's fresco employs the vocabulary of an industrial age in the throes of a crisis. By the time he left the United States, he had witnessed a country that had descended from apparently abundant prosperity into economic and social catastrophe. His country had gone through its own crisis and betrayal in the early 1930s when the pursuit of power had usurped the notion of the political ideal. In *Catharsis* Orozco did not even allow himself the luxury of an ideal against which he could set his portrayal of the modern world, nor was he prepared to acknowledge the sense of national optimism that Mexican political society was again experiencing with its newly elected and radical president, Lazaro Cárdenas. Instead, in the starkest of terms, the mural is a foreboding of the fire that would consume the modern world five years later as it descended into the Second World War. Painted in the same building and at the same time as Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads*, which it faces, *Catharsis* offers an uncompromising reality and contrast to Rivera's grandiloquent rhetorical vision of the future.

Upon the completion of this mural, Orozco accepted what were to be the most significant commissions of his career, in Guadalajara in the state of Jalisco. The Guadalajara murals, which include those on the history of the Spanish conquest painted in the Hospicio Cabañas, are a return to a more Mexican context in terms of their subject matter. Yet despite this, they also function as an incisive commentary on the contemporary world. They represent a continuation of thematic motifs that had already appeared in Orozco's work, those of struggle, betrayal, self-consuming violence, and the disparity between the ideal and reality. Orozco's ideological position was profoundly at odds with that of Rivera and Siqueiros. For him, the ideal of freedom could not be gained by joining a political party of the left, as his two compatriots had done. Indeed, throughout his life his position was that of committed non-alignment. But he was far from being an anarchist as suggested by some of his critics, and vehemently rejected such charges: 'Those who say I am an anarchist do not know me. I am a partisan with absolute freedom of thought, a real free thinker: neither a dogmatist nor an anarchist: neither an enemy of hierarchies nor a partisan of unyielding affirmations.'[39] In an examination of freedom as an ideal, Orozco expressed himself in his work in ways which many found contradictory. Wherever he saw the call for freedom being tarnished by an impostor, he brought a ruthless criticism to bear on its usurpers, however fine their rhetoric and however pure the colour of their banners. Yet his sharp criticism of the social world was only one aspect of the stand that he took, for he seemed to accept both good and bad. It is within these unities and polarities that Orozco's political, moral and philosophical discourse on the modern world is to be found in Guadalajara.

The first of the cycles was painted in the assembly hall of the University of Guadalajara and was begun in 1936. The cycle consists of two separate murals, one high up in the huge cupola of the building, entitled *Creative Man*, depicting a synthesis of the most noble qualities within humanity in the form of images of the worker, the philosopher-teacher, the scientist and the rebel. The four large figures are portrayed against a deep red background and occupy the whole of the cupola. The scientist, whose head faces in several directions simultaneously, represents the inquiring human mind seeking knowledge through discovery and invention. The figure of the worker – technical and constructive man – appears to emanate from a strange, hooked machine complex, while the hands clasp a lever. In the relationship of the other two figures, the philosopher-teacher and the rebel, Orozco postulates an ideal between thought and action.[40] The rebel, whose body projects strongly down towards the viewer, is shown constrained by a rope around his neck, the symbol of his oppression. In one of his hands he holds a swirling red flag which flows over to form the background to the didactic gesture of the philosopher-teacher. The clasped hands of the rebel and the philosopher, just visible at the edge of the cupola, cement this unity of thought and action, the physical and intellectual aspects of progress.

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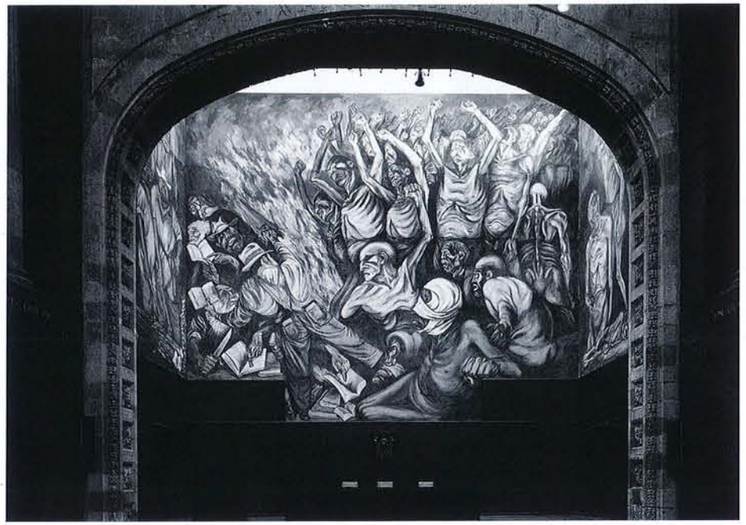
José Clemente Orozco: *The Rebellion of Man – The Leaders*. Fresco, 1936. University of Guadalajara, left-hand panel, Mexico

148
José Clemente Orozco: *The Rebellion of Man – the People and Their False Leaders*. Fresco, 1936. University of Guadalajara, centre panel, Mexico.

149
José Clemente Orozco: *The Rebellion of Man – The Victims*. Fresco, 1936. University of Guadalajara, right-hand panel, Mexico.

150 *opposite*
José Clemente Orozco: *Creative Man*. Fresco, 1936. University of Guadalajara, Mexico.



In the mural below, however, Orozco expresses the duality of thought and action in a different light. Here, his subject is not the realm of human ideal but that of a real, modern human experience. *The Rebellion of Man* represents the rebellion of the masses against their exploiters. However, the exploiters are not greedy, stereotypical capitalists, but prophets of a false ideology, whose henchmen's despotic presence seems to promise the continuation of misery, poverty and starvation. The presentation of this bitter and angry theme is subdivided into three constituent parts. Each part occupies a separate panel of the niche and conveys its own subject and character, which, in an almost Brecht-like way, Orozco plays off against the subject of the adjoining panels. The central panel, *The People and Their False Leaders*, forms the introduction to the theme. Orozco has placed a mass of wretched, emaciated people against a flaming background. In their anger and desperation, they gesticulate at a group of men to their left – the ideologues of modern social revolution. The bearded figure with dark glasses to the left, wielding a knife and pointing to the pages of a book has a notable resemblance to Karl Marx, while the face of the figure in the upper background could easily be a caricature of Leon Trotsky. The figure in the foreground, holding a book in the left hand and a carpenter's saw in the right, could be that of Siqueiros.

In the two narrow adjoining panels showing corrupt leaders and the suffering masses, Orozco presents the reasons for his expressive anger. In the left-hand panel, *The Leaders*, three ape-like figures represent the presence of a new set of power-seeking *caudillos* (political bosses), who have arisen as a consequence of false leadership and now have a pretext for revolt. Their swaggering stance and menacing sledgehammers, together with the pile of books and rifles at their sides express the imposition by force of the ideologies contained in the books. The physical attributes of the figures in the foreground indicate that Orozco intended the panel to be a criticism, not of organized labour, but of some of its more notorious Mexican leaders.[41]

151
José Clemente Orozco: *Hidalgo*.
Fresco, 1937. Governor's Palace,
Guadalajara.

The right-hand panel, *The Victims*, is a display of emaciated and tragic figures. Taken together, the three panels can be interpreted as a commentary on what Orozco saw as the betrayal of the Mexican revolution during the early part of the decade. But painted as it was at the beginning of what was also one of the most radical and politically optimistic times of Mexico's post-revolutionary experience, the mural can simultaneously be interpreted as a thesis on what Orozco saw as the questionable assumptions of modern ideological political revolutions, in which the liberation of the masses seems to be sacrificed. Whatever its critical specificity, the theme of contemporary revolt was one that Orozco repeated in his second cycle, on the walls of the main staircase of the governor's palace in Guadalajara.

In this second cycle, a figure from Mexican history, Miguel Hidalgo – the priest and father of Mexican independence in the nineteenth century – is used to deliver a commentary on the contemporary world. As a champion of the Indian, the poor and the oppressed, the figure of Hidalgo is synonymous in the Mexican mind with the struggle for independence. However, although the principal figure is Mexican, the thrust of the work's commentary transcends strictly national boundaries. Apart from the figure of Hidalgo, the work contains no other specifically Mexican references.

The cycle was begun in 1937 and is painted around three large adjoining walls above a grand staircase. The walls converge at the top in a sweeping curve that then drops down towards a series of arched entrances leading on to an upper-floor corridor. The figure of Hidalgo occupies the whole of the upper part of the central wall, rising vertically from its base and arching over the staircase. The effect of this is to present Hidalgo as a giant, physically dominating the whole area beneath him. Below Hidalgo is an image of the now familiar cataclysmic revolt: a hoard of emaciated figures are seen bludgeoning and knifing each other to death among a sea of red flags and flames. The conflict is one of total confusion and despair.

On the walls to the right and left Orozco painted images that provide a context for this confusion. On the left, *The Phantasms of Religion in Alliance with the Military* expresses the dark, mystical and demonic forces of the clerical and military establishment. It is a reference to the role played by these forces in Mexican history. On the right, in *The Carnival of the Ideologies* Orozco lambasts the contending ideologies of the political left and right of the twentieth century.

The figure of Hidalgo and the struggle depicted below him is a reworking of the idea expressed in the relationship between the philosopher-teacher figure and the rebel in the assembly hall of the university. Yet instead of calmness, here Hidalgo suggests a messianic urgency, his clenched fist echoing that of Christ in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (1508–12; Sistine Chapel, Rome). Orozco used these two side panels in a similar way to his book-wielding ideologues and brutish political leaders in the assembly hall. In each cycle, the figures symbolize the confounders and oppressors of the masses. As if to underline the nature of Orozco's criticism of modern political ideology, the image of the red flag covering the face of the military figure in *Phantasms* is unmistakable. It is a reworking of the idea that he had employed a decade earlier in the National Preparatory School in *Revolutionary Trinity*, where the red flag symbolized a loss of direction in the revolutionary struggle. At Guadalajara, the image has the more threatening connotations of modern ideological dogma leading to political despotism aggravated by its militaristic aspects.

For Orozco, the images of the left and right walls at the governor's palace symbolize both the historical and the contemporary political and ideological forces that have distorted the cause for which Hidalgo fought. Hidalgo depicted in Messianic purity is not the ideal but the instigator of an ideal, a catalyst in a rebellion and struggle that becomes lost in confusion and despair in the modern world.

At the university in Guadalajara as well as at the governor's palace, the physical separation of the ideal and reality in each cycle is a constant feature. The lower sections of both murals contain material that is severe, critical, pessimistic and often nihilistic, whereas the upper sections express affirmation and are inspirational and idealistic in tone. This is the domain of human ideals, intellect and hope. This polarity is reflected in the colour schemes Orozco employed in the upper and lower sections of each mural. The lower sections are generally austere in colour, bordering on the monochromatic. Acidic greys are highlighted

152 *top*
José Clemente Orozco: *Phantasms of Religion in Alliance with the Military*. Fresco, 1937. Governor's Palace, Guadalajara.

153 *bottom*
José Clemente Orozco: *The Carnival of the Ideologies*. Fresco, 1937. Governor's Palace, Guadalajara.

with flecks of white in the figures. The drawing is satirical, gestural and expressionistic, conveying anger and bitterness. Conversely, the drawing in the upper sections of the cycles is much clearer and more monumental, even classical; likewise, the colours are brighter and the tones more brilliant.

Orozco's dualistic approach is also reflected in his imagery. The red flag changes dramatically in meaning in different contexts. In the cupola of the university, it is an emblem of solidarity, while on the staircase of the governor's palace, it expresses the opposite – tyranny, exploitation and cruelty – and is literally portrayed as a blindfold. Perhaps the most impressive and telling of all the motifs employed by Orozco in Guadalajara is the image of fire. It features as a raging conflagrational background in the lower mural at the university, as a firebrand in the hands of the monumental image of Hidalgo on the stairs of the governor's palace and appears in the famous cupola image at the Hospicio Cabañas. It is an evocative visual symbol of conflict, pain and suffering, of purification and inspiration, its meaning, like that of the red flag, dependent on the context in which it was used by Orozco.

In 1940 Orozco was commissioned to paint a fresco panel for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and he chose to return to the theme he had explored in *Catharsis*, the oppression of humanity by a mechanized modernity. Entitled *Dive Bomber*, the mural portrays human heads crushed beneath the heavy weight of a composition of gigantic mechanical parts, heavy chains and conveyor belts. As in the images of the murals at Dartmouth College and the Hospicio Cabañas, as well as in *Catharsis*, Orozco 'seems to be trying to say here that in modern society based on industry – or rather capitalism – the machine dominates human dynamism, iron dominates flesh, matter dominates the mind, and militarized mass dominates man'.[42]

Another dimension that was increasingly embedded in Orozco's mural work of this decade was the mindlessness of the masses, perhaps the most questionable of Orozco's discourses on the modern world. This theme would emerge more fully in the murals that he painted at the end of the 1930s in the Gabino Ortíz Library in Jiquilpan. In his expression of ideological betrayal and mechanized oppression, Orozco seems to see little hope for a humanity free from the most dire consequences of the

modern apocalypse. Their revolutionary ideals betrayed, their sense of direction lost, the revolutionary masses in the lower panels in the Hospicio Cabañas become nothing more than caricatures of a modern humanity, spiritually dislocated and distorted. They are no longer tragic, for they have been transported into a hideous farce.

The profoundly critical spirit that permeates so much of Orozco's work at Guadalajara is in striking contrast to the radical optimism that attended the Cárdenas administration (1934–40). It is worth recalling that Orozco painted these murals in a city at odds with the radical agendas of Cárdenas. It is perhaps also reasonable to suggest that Jalisco's conservative governor, Don Torpete, saw an important political and cultural opportunity in inviting Mexico's leading iconoclast back to the place of his birth to paint murals in the city's most prestigious public buildings. In so doing both he and Orozco were making a gesture against the hegemony of Mexico City, with its leftist, nationalist rhetoric and radical cultural and political agendas. That Orozco created such a powerful and critical discourse in Guadalajara emphasized the nature of the gesture, even if there was no overt collusion in its making.

During the decade of the 1930s, the work of Rivera and Orozco had provided contrasting expressions of the same reality. Their work diverged most in terms of the character of their commentary. Certainly their style of painting and their pictorial formulations also differed. However, as far as their murals were concerned, neither Rivera nor Orozco displayed a need to revolutionize the aesthetics of their work in relation to the means or the materials of execution. Although the age of technology and the social realities of the modern world were often the subject of their pictorial comment, neither factor directly influenced the physical characteristics of their creativity at this time. Indeed, both painted in the fresco medium, a time-honoured tradition for mural painters that extended back over many centuries. By contrast, the working practices of Siqueiros as a mural painter were profoundly influenced by the technical innovation of the modern industrial age. His drive to revolutionize the means of creating murals during the 1930s is thus as much a commentary on the age of modernity as is his powerful imagery.

Siqueiros began the decade of the 1930s in prison, following his participation in a May Day demonstration. Released in November 1930, he was sent into internal exile for a year in the silver-mining town of Taxco, where his movements were tightly controlled and he was forbidden to leave the town without the permission of the police. The year in Taxco was important to Siqueiros' development as an artist, for not only did he produce much studio work during this time but he also met with a number of important foreign writers, intellectuals and artists. Among these the most significant was the Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein, who was in Mexico at the time making his film *¡Que Viva México!*.[43]

Siqueiros' friendship with Eisenstein during his time in Taxco was of fundamental importance for his approach to the analysis and use of pictorial form. It is quite clear that by the time Siqueiros left Mexico in May 1932, he believed that the technically innovative character of the modern industrial world would require a profound transformation in the methodologies and aesthetics of artistic practice.

Like his two compatriots, in the early 1930s Siqueiros found himself in the United States. In 1932 he went to Los Angeles, a move that was as much the result of the political pressure from the Mexican government as his wish to fulfil an invitation to hold an exhibition of his work in the city.[44] While in exile in Taxco, Siqueiros had come into contact with Mrs. Chouinard, the director of the Los Angeles-based Chouinard Art School. Chouinard was keen to transform her school into a progressive centre for modern art and had invited Siqueiros to give a course in fresco painting.[45] Accepting the offer, Siqueiros ended a six-year break from mural painting. It also provided him with the opportunity to immerse himself in what became a major preoccupation: experimentation with new modern techniques and methods for creating murals.

Siqueiros created five murals during the 1930s: three in Los Angeles, an experimental work in Argentina, and his first great mural, *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, which he began at the Electricians' Union in Mexico City in 1939. The first of these, at the Chouinard Art School, arose out of the fresco course he had been invited to teach there. As originally envisaged, the course proved far too limiting in its scope for Siqueiros.[46]

> I searched for an adequate wall, but there did not exist anything convenient inside the school. . . . In despair at not finding anything adequate I located an exterior wall. But this wall was on the front part of the school and this front had six windows and a door. The best thing for learning fresco painting, I told the proprietor, was just such a problem. And this was a very interesting problem.[47]

By using the exterior face of the school, Siqueiros confronted formidable difficulties that demanded a radically innovative approach to the use of materials and techniques to combat rain, sunshine and walls of rough concrete. In consultation with the architects of the building, Richard Nuetra and Sumner Spalding, Siqueiros devised a solution which involved painting on a mix of waterproof white cement and sand while the cement was still wet, thus ensuring the chemical bonding of the pigment to the cement base while the latter was drying. However, in devising this solution Siqueiros and his student group encountered the problem of the rapidity with which the cement dried in the hot Californian sun, allowing only small areas to be painted at a time. Siqueiros duly solved this by abandoning paint brushes, using instead a compressor and a spray gun. This allowed for the rapid painting of much larger areas at a time.

Other innovative procedures were employed in the Chouinard mural, some of which stem from Siqueiros' relationship with Eisenstein. Siqueiros wrote

> After making our first sketch we used the camera and motion picture to aid us in the elaboration of our first drawing, particularly of the models. To draw our figures from posing models would be like reverting to the ox cart for transportation. . . . To replace the slow and costly method of pencil tracing and poince-pattern projection we used the photographic projector, a method of enlarging . . . and thereby projecting our drawing directly onto the wall.[48]

Besides his use of innovative methods and materials, Siqueiros created a mural team out of his class and some graduate students which he called 'The Block of Mural Painters'.[49]

The Chouinard mural was inaugurated on 7 July 1932. Entitled *Street Meeting*, it met with a mixed public reaction. Some attacked it for its overtly political subject-matter. One magazine wrote that 'the art of fresco in this country will languish until it is able to free itself from the sorrows of Mexico and the dull red glow of communism'.[50] Certainly the image depicting a workers' meeting implied an agitational and propagandist approach, particularly since its setting was a very public and exterior one in a city whose authorities were stridently against labour unions. Arthur Miller described the central scene as 'a red shirted orator haranguing the hungry people. On either side of the soap box and listening very intently were a black man and a white woman each carrying a child.'[51]

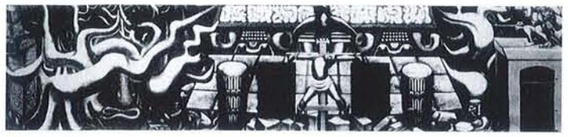
The completion of this first Los Angeles mural represented a major step forward for Siqueiros. It allowed him to incorporate a whole range of innovative techniques, materials and methods into his working practices, some of which neither he nor other mural painters had used before. The mural made a substantial impact on the cultural community in Los Angeles. As a result, Siqueiros was asked by F. K. Krenz of the Plaza Art Center in Olvera Street to undertake another mural. This second public work in Los Angeles, entitled *Tropical America*, was much larger than the previous piece, stretching over eighty feet along the length of a hall housing the Plaza Art Center. More important than its dimensions was the fact that the centre was situated in the middle of the area of Los Angeles where most of the city's Mexican population lived.

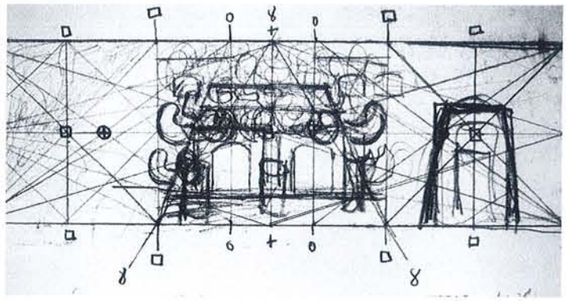
Tropical America provided Siqueiros with the opportunity for more emphatic political content than his previous mural. For him, tropical America meant 'our land, our America, of undernourished natives, of enslaved Indians and Negroes, that nevertheless inhabit the most fertile land in which the richest and most ferocious people on earth lie. And as a symbol of the United States' imperialism, the principal capitalist oppressor, I used an Indian crucified on a double cross, on top of which stood the Yankee eagle of American finance.'[52] The obvious militant and agitational content of the Plaza Art Center mural was set against the context of a California in which thousands of Mexican migratory workers lived and suffered in the most wretched social conditions and whose efforts to improve their circumstances were continually and ruthlessly crushed.[53] The mural provides a clear example of how profoundly different Siqueiros' work was from any of the works Rivera created in California. Rivera largely eschewed depictions of or comments on the painful political realities existing in California at the time, with which

154 *top*
David Alfaro Siqueiros: *Tropical America*. Fresco, 1932. Exterior of the Plaza Art Center, Olvera Street, Los Angeles, California. The mural has been partially painted over and has suffered bad deterioration.

155 *bottom*
Study drawing for *Tropical America*.

he might have been expected to identify through his Marxist ideology. Unfortunately, due to the original whitewashing and the decay of the paint surface, both the Chouinard mural and *Tropical America* to all intents and purposes have ceased to exist.





In the execution of *Tropical America*, Siqueiros employed the same innovatory practices that he had used in the Chouinard mural, although here he allowed for the reintroduction of the brush in order to refine the somewhat insensitive forms rendered through the use of the airbrush. The introduction and use of the photograph and projector in both of Siqueiros' Los Angeles murals owes much to the influence of Eisenstein, but the proximity of Hollywood was also an important factor. Hollywood film directors were the first to use the technique of photo-murals as it proved more economical than using scene painters to paint backdrops.[54] Also, in May 1932, when Siqueiros arrived in Los Angeles, a large exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York entitled 'Murals by American Painters and Photographers' was claimed by the author of the exhibition's catalogue, Julian Levey, to be the first public recognition of the photo-mural as a valid form, and in which recognized artists in the medium were invited to exhibit. Whether Siqueiros was aware of this exhibition is uncertain, but the context of the times suggests that the use of photography and by extension the use of the projector was current practice in some quarters and may well have influenced Siqueiros to take up this approach.

Before leaving Los Angeles, Siqueiros painted a third mural in the home of the film director Dudley Murphy. Entitled *Portrait of Mexico Today*, it was painted along the wall of a covered patio. Its imagery contains the same receding stepped pyramids that Siqueiros had employed in *Tropical America*. Its composition is simple and stark. On the left is a seated figure brandishing a gun with bags of gold. The man's red mask has been allowed to drop, revealing the features of Mexico's 'strongman' at the time, President Elías Plutarco Calles. The image symbolizes betrayal. The victims of the betrayal are portrayed at the centre and far end of the work. Two peasant women and a small child sit in the middle of the receding steps, while on an adjoining wall on the right, two bodies are depicted: victims of Calles' revolutionary treachery.

Siqueiros left Los Angeles in October 1932 when the American authorities refused permission for him to stay any longer. His experience in the United States was evidently profound. Unlike Orozco and Rivera, Siqueiros developed an approach to his mural art which synthesized his overtly communist ideology with a belief that both this and the age of industrial and technical modernity required the application of equally radical and revolutionary materials and techniques. The age of the industrial worker was for Siqueiros the age of the masses. This called for an exterior mural art which could address those masses. Similarly, modern industry now produced materials and equipment that would completely revolutionize the working practices of the creative visual artist. It was a dynamic symmetry in a new ideological aesthetic that was created by Siqueiros.

The circumstances of the next stage of Siqueiros' development as a mural painter precluded any practical realization of his new commitment to exterior mural work. Nevertheless, the period that he spent in South America after leaving the United States in 1932 was no less significant in terms of the further practical and theoretical development of his art. Siqueiros first went to Montevideo in Uruguay, where he had been asked to deliver talks to various cultural groups within the city.[55] Hints of his principal

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David Alfaro Siqueiros: *Plastic Exercise*. Keimfarben silicate paint on cement, 1933. Private residence, Buenos Aires, Argentina. This illustration is a reconstruction of the mural and site.

ideas on mural painting at that time were contained in the text of a speech he delivered to the city's Fine Arts Circle

> I realized that it was necessary to organize a totally new method of pictorial composition. The Mexican muralists found themselves obliged to disentangle themselves from Italian and Indian masters of the past and to establish the basis for a dynamic composition for murals in accordance with the movement of the spectator, in contrast to the antique and modern academic theories that are the product of the laborious study of easel painting methods.[56]

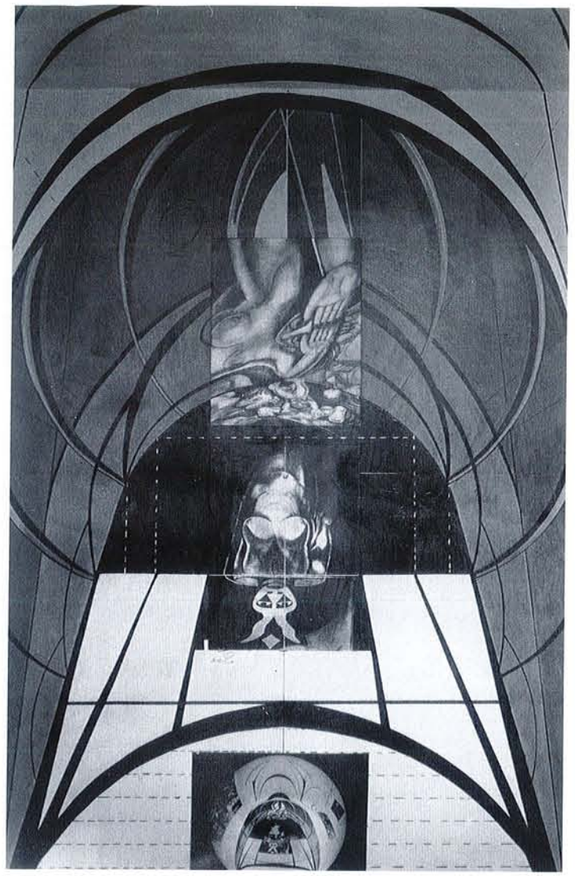
Siqueiros often repeated the claim that it was his dissatisfaction with antiquated materials and techniques that led him to consider dramatic innovations in the creation of murals. Although true to some extent, many of his innovations were the result of accident or of circumstances that made it impossible for him to continue with old methods.[57]

An example of chance discovery from his time in Montevideo underlines the genesis of much of Siqueiros' innovations. Running short of paint one day and in urgent need of further supplies, Siqueiros toured various stores in Montevideo in search of more oil paint. Finding none, he decided to buy some cans of industrial pigment as a substitute. Siqueiros bought a paint system based on a nitrocellulose medium and which was similar to the paint used in the car industry. A later version refined by Siqueiros' collaborator, the chemist José Gutierrez, known by the more familiar name of pyroxaline, became the principal material with which Siqueiros painted the majority of his murals from 1939 onwards. Although he executed a number of experimental easel works to try out this new paint in Montevideo, he had to wait until 1936, when he opened up his experimental workshop in New York, before he could really subject the industrial paint to all the creative rigours that were made possible by its special properties.

Siqueiros' claim that innovative procedures, techniques and modern materials had a crucial generic effect on the creation of a modern aesthetic was never more obvious than in the one mural he painted in South America, commissioned by Notalio Botaño, the editor of *Critica*, in 1933 for his private residence outside Buenos Aires. There was a certain irony in Siqueiros' acceptance of this commission, located in the bar area of the basement of Botaño's home. It seemed to be the antithesis of Siqueiros' call for a public art shortly after arriving in Argentina. In an article written for *Critica*, entitled 'A Call to the Artists of Argentina', Siqueiros had written that it was necessary for artists to 'create work on the most visible sides of high modern buildings, in the most artistically strategic places in working-class districts, in Union halls, in public squares, in sports stadia, in open air theaters.'[58] Nevertheless, the project represented an important innovation leading towards what Siqueiros described as 'a revolutionary improvement in plastic and graphic arts'.[59]

In carrying out the experimental mural project for Botaño, Siqueiros adopted similar procedures to those which he had employed in Los Angeles with his 'Block of Mural Painters'. He collectivized the creative process by creating what he termed a 'polygraphic team' to execute the work. This team was made up of the Argentine painters Antonio Berni, Juan Carlos Castagnino, Lino Spilembergo, the Uruguay artist Enrique Lázaro and the film maker Leon Klimovsky. Although the character of this mural was quite different from those that had been painted in Los Angeles, aspects of the work procedure were similar. To make the initial sketches on to the wall surfaces, for example, the spray gun was used instead of a brush. A camera was used to collect material and to make readjustments, while a projector was used to project images which the team then traced on to the wall surfaces.[60]

The significance of *Plastic Exercise*, as a purely experimental work, lies not so much in its expression of theme or imagery, in this case mostly female nudes, as in its technical features. The room in which the project was carried out was unusual in that it was long and tunnel-shaped. The composition of the mural was thus developed according to what Siqueiros described as the 'dynamic character' of the room's architecture. Particular attention was paid to analyzing the movement of potential spectators within the room. This appears to have been the first case of Siqueiros' practical use and development of what he would term 'polyangular perspective composition'. This involved walking around the room to determine the points on the floor area from which the mural would be viewed, resulting in the formulation of a number of different vanishing points of perspective, which would come into view as the spectator moved around the room



to the optimum viewing positions on the floor area. By establishing the design of the composition in this way, Siqueiros exploited the transformation that occurs in the shapes and lengths of forms when viewed along specifically constructed lines of perspective from different distances and directions. The movement of the spectator results in a kaleidoscopic effect, enhancing the dynamic character of the composition.

In this particular instance, Siqueiros' preoccupation with compositional dynamism was greatly assisted by the cylindrical shape of the room, the curved surfaces of which greatly increased the distortions of form as seen by a moving spectator. It also influenced the way in which his team created their composition. 'There was no previous sketch', Siqueiros wrote,

> we started directly on the walls, and were influenced by architectural space as we progressed. By living permanently with its geometry, we developed and readjusted our work. . . . We broke with the tradition of static photographic reproduction . . .(with) the use of a cine camera. Instead of placing the camera symmetrically in front of the parts we wanted to photograph, we kept it moving, following the path logically taken by a spectator. . . . We used the camera as though it were the eye of a normal spectator.[61]

Siqueiros worked with his polygraphic team on *Plastic Exercise* for approximately three months, finally completing the work in December 1933. In conclusion, Siqueiros did indeed regard the work as an exercise. He wrote

> *Plastic Exercise* is NOT an ideologically revolutionary work, by which I mean that it is not a work of direct, immediate use to the revolutionary proletariat. . . . In a solitary and distant private residence, and in the most private place of that residence, it could not be revolutionary. . . . As its name indicates, *Plastic Exercise* is only a project of abstract art, only a group art exercise, art practice, dynamic, technical, plastic GYMNASTICS. . . . indispensable in order to produce the totally revolutionary art which was our objective.[62]

Siqueiros was forced to leave Argentina as a result of having attended, against the restrictions placed on him by the Buenos Aires police, a meeting of the Argentine Furniture Workers Union. Following his expulsion, he returned to New York, where he held an exhibition of his work at the Delphic Studios. The period between his departure from Argentina and his decision in 1937 to go to Spain to join the Republicans in the country's civil war, was a period of further frenetic activity for Siqueiros.

While he was in New York in 1934, he engaged Diego Rivera in a very public and grotesquely theatrical polemic, which continued after both returned to Mexico the following year. Siqueiros' confrontation with Rivera, in terms of their respective positions in politics and artistic matters, had a history that extended back to the days of the Syndicate and *El Machete*. The gulf between the two artists could not have been wider. In terms of sheer quantity and quality, the work of Siqueiros was greatly overshadowed by Rivera's international reputation. In an article entitled 'Rivera's Counter-Revolutionary Road' in the communist journal *New Masses*, in May 1934, Siqueiros strongly criticized Rivera, linking his support of Trotsky both to his artistic weakness and driving personal ambition. This crude construction of Rivera's position did not entirely overshadow the importance of the critique that Siqueiros aimed at his compatriot's

work. Central to this was Siqueiros' contention that Rivera was technically backward. Siqueiros found that Rivera had not discovered

> the technique and methodology appropriate to revolutionary art. The technique of Rivera, as that of the whole Mexican artistic movement, is mystical for the purposes of revolutionary art. Interior walls, that anachronistic fresco technique, the paint brush etc. He never had any inventive capacity in revolutionary techniques. His are useless media and materials not only for the purposes of the art of the propaganda, but also for the conditions of modern construction. . . .[63]

Siqueiros also criticized Rivera for being an 'aesthete of imperialism' and the creator of 'little paintings that could be snapped up . . . quickly to comply with the demand of foreign tourists'.[64] Other criticisms were that Rivera was pandering to the market, a remark that was clearly directed at his acceptance of commissions from some of the leading American industrialists. Unfortunately, Siqueiros' observations became so enmeshed in an onslaught of factionalist communist political criticisms that his artistic critique was almost totally obscured. The impact was further diminished by the fact that the murals he singled out for criticism, such as those in Detroit, were widely considered to be masterpieces of twentieth-century mural painting.

The polemic raised by the article in *New Masses* continued into the next year. It resurfaced at a conference of teachers at the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City, and later in the pages of the 1935 winter edition of the *Kansas University Review*, in an issue devoted to the theme of 'Art and Social Struggle'. In an essay entitled 'The Art Movement in Mexico', Siqueiros attacked Rivera for being a government painter and for painting murals with 'sickles and hammers in obscure places unfrequented by the masses. . . . served only by government workers, stenographers and bureaucrats and which were never seen by the Indians of Xochimilco'.[65]

Siqueiros returned to New York in 1936 as a delegate to the meeting of the American Artists' Congress. He remained there until his departure for Spain the following year, and the intervening period proved to be especially important, for it was then that he opened his 'Experimental Workshop', an enterprise that focused on innovation in the methods and materials used in the creative process. In New York, Siqueiros gathered around him a group of artists, many of whom were American. They included the sculptor Harold Lehman, Jackson Pollock and his brother Sande McCoy, with whom Siqueiros had worked in Los Angeles, Axel Horn, George Cox, Louis Ferstdt and Clara Mahl. The other artists in the group were Latin American, many of whom had also gone to New York to attend the congress. These included Roberto Berdecio, José Guttiérrez, Conrado Vásquez, Antonio Pujol, and Luís Arenal, with whom he had also worked in Los Angeles, and who was to shortly become his brother-in-law. In April 1936 Siqueiros and his group opened the Experimental Workshop at 5, West 24th Street in Manhattan, describing it in a press release as 'a laboratory of modern techniques'.[66]

> Two main points were embodied in the workshop plan. The workshop was to be a laboratory for experimentation in modern techniques and was to create art for the people. Under the first heading came experiment with regard to tools, materials, aesthetic or artistic approaches and methods of working collectively. Under the second point came a utilization of media extending from the simple, direct statement of the poster, whose service is fleeting, to the complex statement of a relatively permanent mural.[67]

Although the group did not execute any murals, there is no doubt that the experience of Siqueiros' Experimental Workshop was fundamentally important to his development as a mural painter. The experimental easel paintings that were created, such as *Birth of Fascism*, *Collective Suicide* and *Stop the War*, all produced in 1936, the experimentation with and exploitation of the unplanned results of throwing, dripping or splattering the new pyroxaline paint system with nitrocellulose lacquers, and the employment of techniques and materials such as airbrushing, stencils, sand, wood and paper, all contributed to what Siqueiros described as his 'technical road as a revolutionary painter'.[68]

The political floats and posters that the group created were also significant. In many cases, these also involved the use of innovatory approaches and techniques. The polychromed, three-dimensional float constructed for the May Day rally in 1936 was particularly significant. Harold Lehman described it as crystallizing 'practically all the ideas about which the workshop had been

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Siqueiros' Experimental Workshop
political float, 1936, New York.

organized. It was art for the people, executed collectively; and into it went dynamic ideas, new painting media, mechanical construction and mechanical movement, polychrome sculpture and the use of new tools.'[69] In many ways, the creative approach of this float with its moving parts and polychromed, three-dimensional design foreshadowed Siqueiros' monumental work, *The March of Humanity in Latin America*, which he would create at the Polyforum in Mexico City in the late 1960s, where he brought together in one vast collective endeavour two- and three-dimensional elements, sound, light and movement.

The experimental easel work was conducted by Siqueiros with extraordinary gusto. Many of the painting techniques and methods involved precede the approach emulated some fifteen years later by Jackson Pollock, who worked on these paintings as part of the Workshop's group of artists. Axel Horn recalled the approach

> Spurred on by Siqueiros, ... everything became material for our investigations. For instance lacquer opened up enormous possibilities in the application of color. We sprayed through stencils and friskets, embedded wood, metal and sandpaper. We used it in thick glazes, or built it up in thick globs. We poured it, dripped it, splattered it, hurled it at the picture surface. It dried quickly, almost instantly and could be removed at will. ... Siqueiros soon constructed a theory and system of 'controled accidents'.[70]

Horn's description indicates the importance of the industrial paint system that Siqueiros had discovered by chance in Montevideo. The pyroxaline's properties were to become important in his painting, for one of its most advantageous aspects was its rapid drying and adhesive qualities. This made it ideal for use in the spraygun or airbrush, devices that he would make constant use of in the years to come. Siqueiros wrote that for him the spray gun was 'an instrument for making marvellous atmospheric effects, for creating space, for making it concave and convex and giving unsuspected strength to its volume ... the mechanical brushes an ally without equal in the formation of flat surfaces'.[71]

In broad terms, Siqueiros saw his Experimental Workshop as the beginning of a second stage in Mexican mural painting. It also constituted the final step on the road to the creation of his mural *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* at the Electricians' Syndicate building in Mexico City. In it he synthesized seven years of material, methodological and technical development with the feelings of his political radicalism to produce his first mature work and one of the great moments in twentieth-century mural art.

Although Mexican muralism had never departed from the expression of ideological content, it had nevertheless remained largely within a traditional aesthetic framework. From a technical point of view, apart from Siqueiros' murals in Los Angeles in the early 1930s and his *Plastic Exercise* project in Buenos Aires in 1933, the mural movement had varied little in its use of the fresco technique. Although Siqueiros had undoubtedly made a significant contribution to a new approach to the mural form in the years leading up to the Electricians' Syndicate mural, his reputation as a muralist and his murals in general had nevertheless not entered the public domain to the extent of those of Diego Rivera or Orozco. In part, this was because Siqueiros had carried out fewer murals. Additionally, those that he painted in the 1930s were not the result of major institutional commissions; they were either private projects far away from the public gaze, or 'radical', open-air street mural projects, none of which had the public effect of either Rivera's commissions in Detroit and New York or Orozco's at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, sanctioned by prestigious institutions or benefactors, giving

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David Alfaro Siqueiros: *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*. Pyroxaline on cement, 1939–40. Mexican Electricians' Syndicate, Mexico City.

them a high public profile. Up until this time, Mexican mural painting was therefore primarily identified with Rivera and Orozco.

However, with the creation of *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, Siqueiros consolidated the development of his radical and innovative aesthetic for the mural medium. This reflected a decisive break with the traditions within which most Mexican mural work had been confined. He mixed radical social content with his innovative methods of working with the new materials and instruments of the modern industrial and technological age. It was a synthesis that would map out Siqueiros' identity as an artist and provided the artistic basis for his increasingly international reputation in the post-war years.

Siqueiros' work on the mural began in 1939, following his return from fighting with the Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War in 1938. Siqueiros' original intention in going to Spain had been to organize a Mexican and Spanish collective of artists to produce pictorial and graphic work for the Republican cause. However, finding that most of the Spanish artists were already mobilized in the war, Siqueiros himself became involved in the fighting. Although he was a foreign national, he was drafted into the ranks of the Spanish Republican Army in March 1937 and was paid a colonel's salary. He remained in Spain until the end of 1938, when he returned to Mexico via Paris and New York. His experience in Spain had an important bearing on the nature of the mural that he painted at the Electricians' Syndicate Building. As an active participant in the anti-fascist struggle, Siqueiros was left with an indelible impression of that time, which informed both the theme he developed and the imagery that he incorporated into it. The description of the battle of Madrid, in which Siqueiros had participated, by Carlos Contreras, Siqueiros' commander, is particularly telling. It 'was a struggle to the death that lasted more than a month. The dead and wounded numbered tens of thousands. I remember the terrible days of the battle of Pingarron with Siqueiros returning from that inferno in the last days of the fighting. He was not the man I had always known, fond of joking and carefree.'[72]

From the start, the commission from the Electricians' Syndicate presented Siqueiros with the opportunity of developing a mural work with a theme that would, he hoped, extend well beyond the largely utilitarian character of the public art that he had created in New York in his Experimental Workshop. It was perhaps his first real chance to execute a mural that would have, as he put it, maximum physical impact and at the same time transcendent and absolute value. By July 1939, with the agreement drawn up between himself and the directorate of the Syndicate, Siqueiros gathered together a team of artists with whom he would carry out the work collectively. It consisted of the Mexican artists Luís Arenal, Antonio Pujol and Roberto Berdecio, and three Spanish painters, Miguel Prieto, Antonio Rodríguez and José Renau. Siqueiros conceived the working of this mural team on a thoroughly egalitarian basis. Everyone was to be paid the same, and he also insisted, at least at the beginning, that discussion and initiative on all matters relating to the project, particularly those concerning the form and content of the mural, should be entirely free. However, as José Renau recalled, there was never any doubt as to who would lead the project and Siqueiros was acting more out of courtesy than from any conviction that others in the group could equally be leaders.

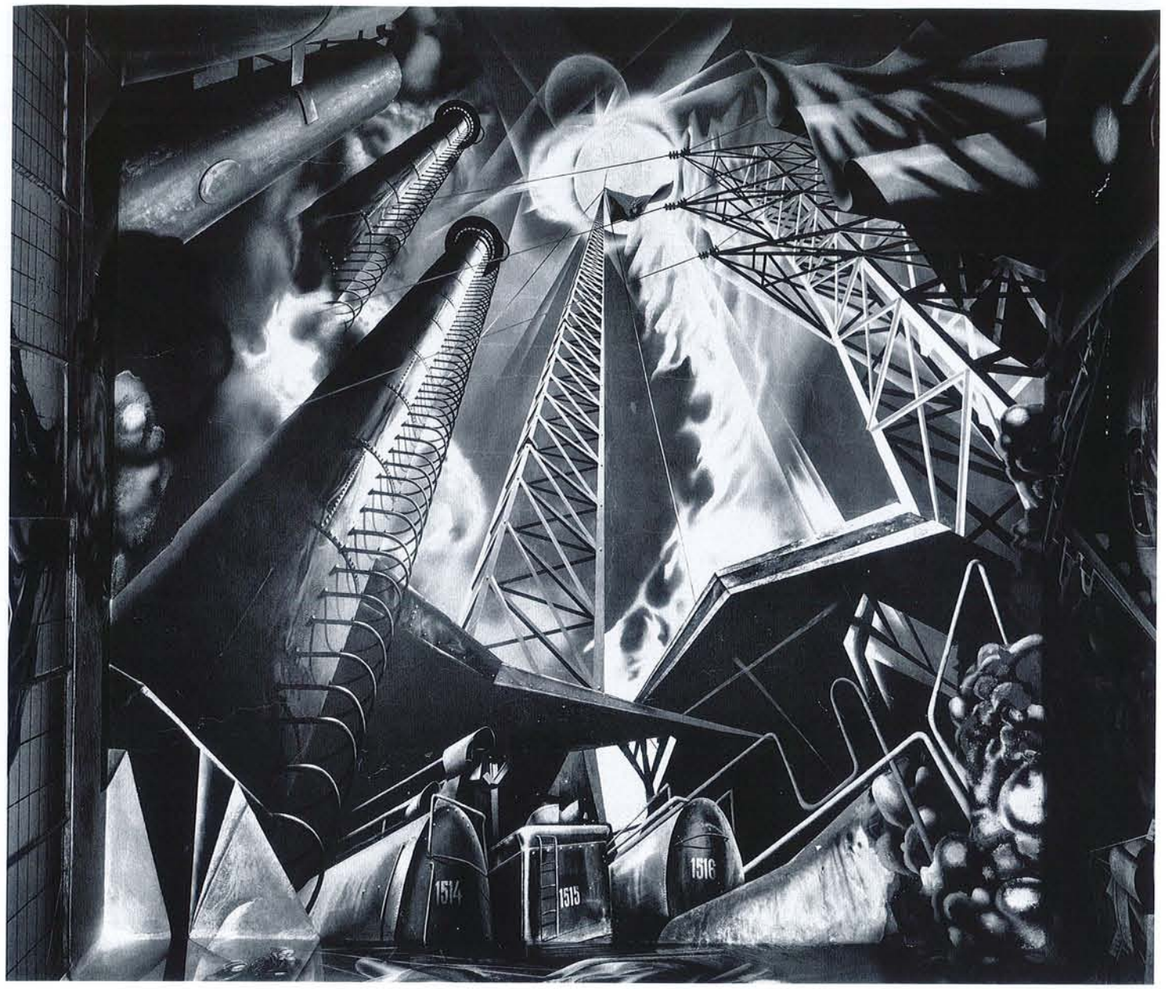
In receiving the commission, Siqueiros was fortunate to be offered by the union's directorate and the architect of the building a choice of what he considered to be the most appropriate site for the painting. This provided Siqueiros with the chance to conceive the project on the basis of every innovation he had developed during the preceding years in relation to the whole creative methodology of the mural. Siqueiros chose the main stairwell of the building leading up to the general offices on the second floor. His choice was made because of the large number of people that would pass through the stairwell and because of the functional and spatial challenge posed by the site. The initial stages of the project were taken up with discussions concerning the architectonic character of the chosen space, with its three vertical walls and a ceiling surrounding the staircase. The second and equally important matter that the team had to consider was the theme for the work and how it would be expressed in relation to the architecture of the site.

In considering the conceptual formal framework within which the theme could be expressed, Siqueiros and his colleagues decided 'to develop the overall theme as a single and dynamic continuous pictorial surface, thus creating a new space that

visually breaks the cubed architectural structure of the stairwell'.[73] The decision to opt for a continuous pictorial composition was due to the ascendant curving character of the site. Only certain areas of the site could be seen together by a spectator moving up or down the staircase at any particular moment, and even then not necessarily in any logical thematic sequence. Furthermore, the combination of the moving spectator and the rectangular construction of the site, with each wall surface at right-angles to the others, made it imperative that the team develop a composition that would visually destroy the rigidity of the cubed construction of the site. Only by doing this could they hope to create a smooth continuous flow of vision that would synchronize with the visual field of the ascending and descending spectators. The approach that Siqueiros and his team used in their work was therefore based on the adoption of his principle that 'all true architectonic space . . . is a machine, and its parts, such as walls, floor, arches, ceiling etc. are the wheels of this machine, which moves rhythmically . . .'[74]

It is perhaps ironic that the theme for the mural was finally developed only after initial site analyses and formal conceptualizations undertaken by Siqueiros and his colleagues had been completed. After all, Siqueiros was an insistently ideological artist, whose use of theme was very much part of the basis of his overall political aesthetic. In the normal tradition of such thinking, the theme would have influenced the generation of the work. However, Siqueiros himself interpreted an understanding and subsequent exploitation of the architectonic dynamics of any architectural and social context for a potential mural as having an important impact and influence on the psychology of looking at and 'receiving' a mural. Siqueiros needed to consider these aspects before developing any specific subject-matter.

The directorate of the Syndicate had originally indicated an overall theme based upon electrical industry for the mural.



However, this general approach conflicted with what Siqueiros and his team considered to be appropriate both for the times in which they lived and for the chosen site of the mural. The experience of the Spanish Civil War, with the Cárdenas administration openly supporting the Republican anti-fascist cause, had had a considerable impact on Mexican society. Such a neutral theme seemed to Siqueiros and his colleagues to be inappropriate for a public art work housed in a trade-union building. In the end the potential conflict between the mural team and the Union's directorate was resolved through Siqueiros' team's direct contact with the workers who used the building, persuading them of the need for a more radical approach to the content.[75]

With a free hand in the choice of theme and with the contact that the team had made with the workers using the building, the immediate political context of the times inevitably proved to be the decisive aspect in the formulation of the project's subject matter. In its original conception, the mural was to be an image of fascism depicted as reaping its destructive consequences upon the world, opposed by the forces of revolution and progress. More specifically, the team chose to focus on fascism as a war machine, and modern weapons of destruction would form some of the central elements of the mural.

Apart from Siqueiros' own input, José Renau perhaps contributed most initially to the visual development of the mural. In order to shape the pictorial basis of the composition,

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David Alfaro Siqueiros: *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*. Pyroxaline on cement, 1939–40. Mexican Electricians' Syndicate, ceiling area, Mexico City.

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David Alfaro Siqueiros: Spectator movement analysis of Electricians' Union mural site for *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*.

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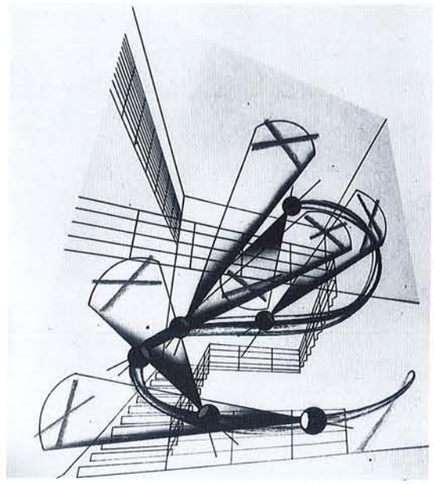
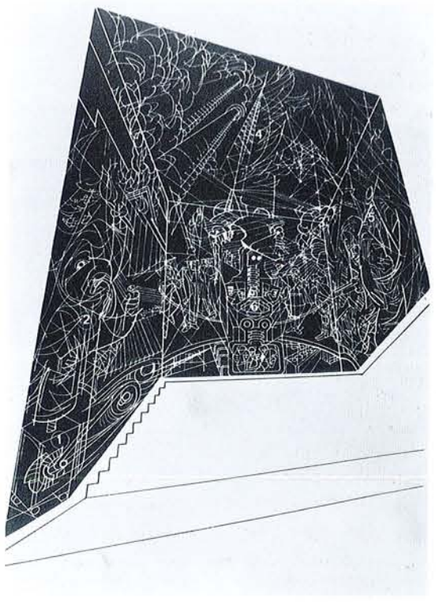
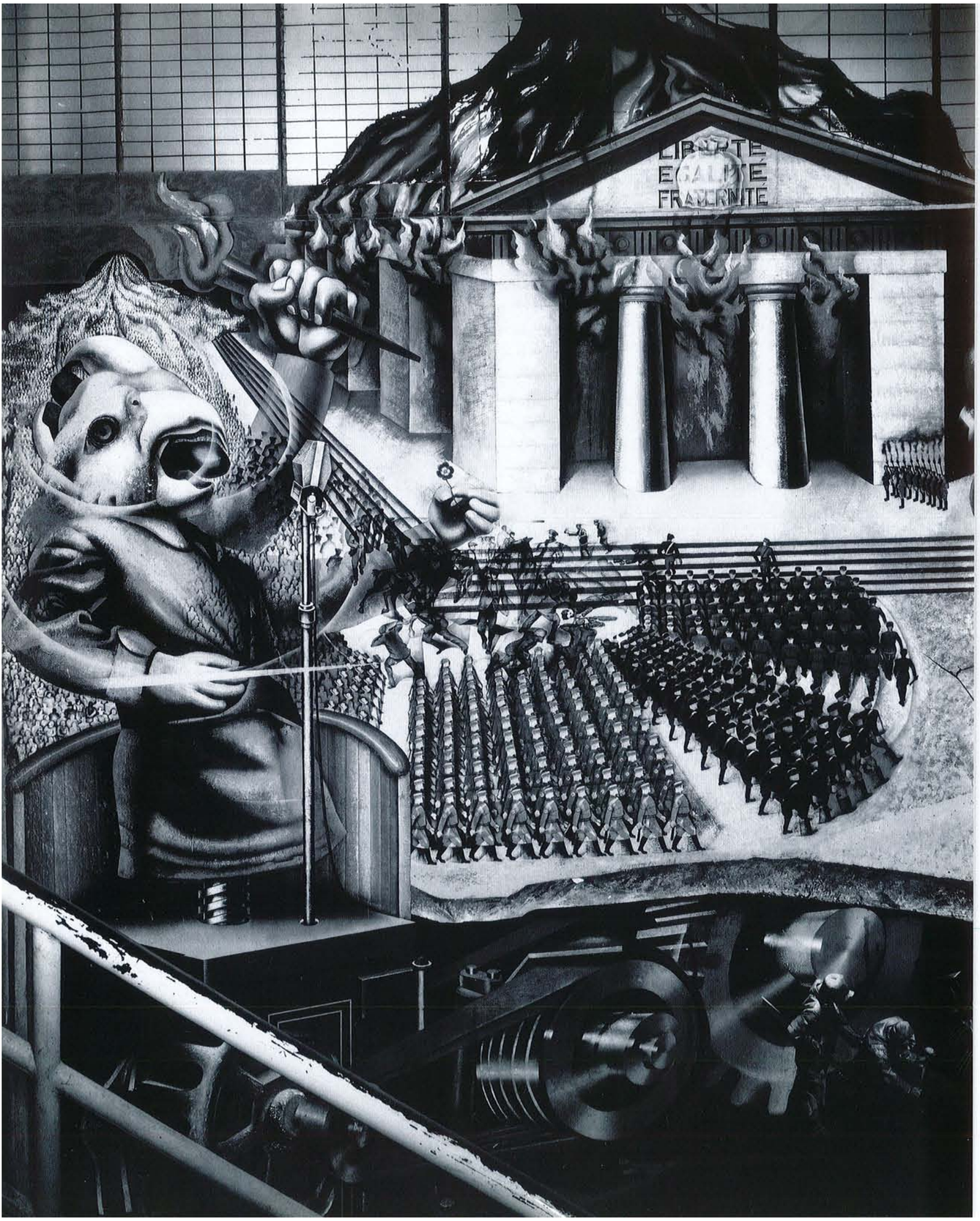
David Alfaro Siqueiros: Viewing analysis of Electricians' Union mural site for *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*.

Renau applied himself to solving the more complex architectonic problems posed by the site by photomontages of images superimposed on a scale model of the stairwell. He was also largely responsible for developing the ceiling area and those sections of the site beneath what the team had discovered to be the lowest viewing curve for a spectator ascending or descending the staircase. In these areas and on the ceiling Renau developed images of the electrical industry, deriving his visual material from photographic excursions to the Nonoalco hydroelectric plant at Necaxa. Renau concentrated his initial efforts on the corner areas of the site, where ceiling, central and right-hand walls converged. He experimented with images intended optically to 'deform' or destroy the angles within this area of the space. The visual analysis that Renau and Prieto had made of the site showed that this upper right-hand corner was particularly visible at the point from which a spectator would start to climb the stairs into the area occupied by the mural. This corner area therefore constituted an important element in the visual dynamic of the composition, and a solution had to be found so that the spectators' vision could be projected uninterrupted up into the ceiling, as well as simultaneously around to the right-hand wall. Renau solved this particular problem by creating an image of smoke and cloud spreading across all the corners and joins of the top right-hand section where central and right-hand walls converged with the ceiling. This had the effect of disguising the join of the walls, allowing him effectively to use images of electrical pylons, radio antennae and chimney stacks in the ceiling areas as formal extensions of the diagonal lines forming the main descriptive elements of the huge aircraft carrier and battle tank on the vertical central wall below. Configured in sharply receding perspective, the images of pylons and antennae on the ceiling created the illusion of deep vertical space, creating a particularly dramatic effect for the spectator ascending the staircase.

Although the main tenets of the theme had been chosen by Siqueiros and his colleagues, there was initially only the vaguest of ideas as to how these might be conceptualized. The clue to the specific images lay in the visual material that the team had at its disposal. Luís Arenal and Antonio Pujol, for example, had compiled an archive of cuttings from contemporary magazines. José

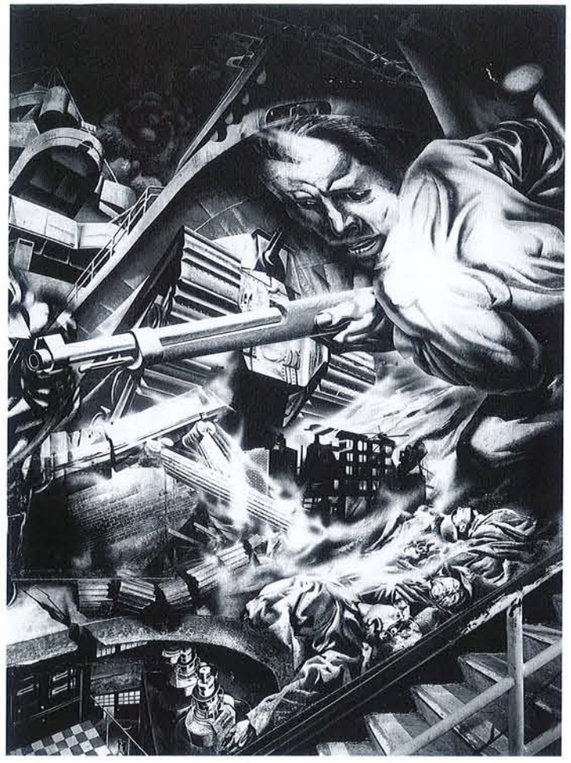





LIBERTE
EGALITE
FRATERNITE

162 *opposite*
David Alfaro Siqueiros: *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*. Pyroxaline on cement, 1939–40. Mexican Electricians' Syndicate, left wall, Mexico City.

163 *below*
David Alfaro Siqueiros: *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*. Pyroxaline on cement, 1939–40. Mexican Electricians' Syndicate, right wall, Mexico City.



Renau had been able to salvage his own archive of 35mm negatives from the effects of war. Renau's desire to use his photomontage and photographic experience was particularly important in relation to Siqueiros' own well-established concern for the importance of the photograph as a valuable creative tool for the mural artist. The visual characteristics of the mural rely to a considerable extent on both men's concern for photography as an advanced source of pictorial inspiration in both technical and creative terms. In many respects, photographic influences give the work its contemporary, journalistic quality, creating a technically advanced yet popular art form.

The actual painting of the mural presented considerable problems at first. The necessity of forging a stylistic or integral unity, as Siqueiros put it, meant that the two Spanish painters Prieto and Luno eventually left the team. The difficulty they encountered in working as part of a team was due, to a considerable extent, to the nature of their training. Luno's painting of the eagle on the central wall proved to be particularly problematic, for he was unable to achieve the required definition and compactness in comparison with the rest of the painting.[76] The mural was in the end painted largely by those remaining. Renau was responsible for painting most of the mechanical areas, particularly the ceiling area, the major part of which he designed himself.[77]

Siqueiros' contribution to the work was very much that of an active director. Of the more important areas for which he was responsible, the fascist 'parrot' figure on the left-hand wall, the fascist and capitalist figures on the central wall, and the image of the revolutionary worker brandishing a rifle on the right-hand wall illustrate his ability to realize dynamic mural images. Overall, the main figure work was painted by Siqueiros assisted by Pujol, while Arenal was often responsible for the background elements.[78] Ironically, the interior location of the mural conflicted with Siqueiros' own publicly expressed commitment to an accessible, exterior mural art. Nevertheless, the building of the Electricians' Syndicate was a very busy gathering place for the city's electrical workers, a fact that for Siqueiros qualified it as a public place. Siqueiros' potential and immediate audience for the mural was proletarian, a matter that was of great concern to him.

In many respects, *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, with its strongly anti-capitalist, anti-fascist theme reflecting the world conflict against German national socialism, painted at the outbreak of the Second World War, appears to be quintessentially a work of the 1930s. Politically, the 1930s were dominated both by a profound crisis within capitalist societies and the development and growth of fascism. Anti-capitalist sentiment, which tended to identify capitalism with fascism during this period, had coalesced around the banners of radical socialism. This was viewed by many as the only positive opposition to the growth of tyrannical right-wing politics. During the 1930s in particular, radical socialism often also became identified with communism and the communist parties, which in turn led to a strong identification

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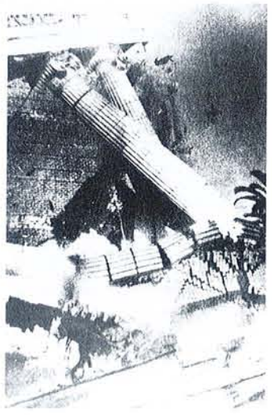
Photographic source material used for *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*.



among large sections of the traditionally left-wing urban working class and some groups of radical middle-class intellectuals with the Soviet Union and Soviet Communism. Among these sections of society, the Soviet Union represented not only a reliable bulwark against fascism, but also a model for the new society that would supersede what they saw as the dying and increasingly dictatorial capitalist regimes.

Although the global struggle against fascism would extend well into the next decade, the time during which Siqueiros executed this mural marks the point of closure of much of what the pre-war epoch had stood for. In Mexico, the regime of the presidency of Lazaro Cárdenas was drawing to a close, and with it, perhaps the most radical period in Mexican national politics since the end of the revolution. In the United States, the crisis wrought by the great Depression was waning with the cumulative success of the massive public employment programmes introduced by the Roosevelt administration. The entry of the United States into the Second World War would also sweep the remaining unemployed into the war effort. American industry became geared towards production for the war and with it the basis for the rebirth of American capitalism in the post-war era was set. Although the struggle against German fascism in Europe and Japanese militarism in Far East Asia was to consume the world in violent conflict for more than half a decade, the start of the Second World War was in reality the beginning of the end of these regimes. Their eventual defeat by the Western democracies and the Soviet Union created a political and social environment in the world during the following decades that was constructed on very different terms from that which existed in the years before the war. The struggle against fascism was replaced by economic competition and political and military confrontation between the victors of that war: the advanced liberal capitalist democracies headed by the United States and the communist power of the Soviet Union. It would usher in the period of the Cold War.

Siqueiros' mural *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* then stands at the intersection between two distinctly different periods. With its theme reflective of and rooted in the political culture of the 1930s, its aesthetic, by contrast, pointed decidedly in the direction of Siqueiros' well-established desire to create a new, more

technologically based unity between form and content. Such a view had been present in much of his thinking throughout the 1930s, during which time he had tirelessly attempted to overhaul the approach to muralism with his constant experiments in techniques and materials. However, the thinking that underpinned the notion of this aesthetic was in reality an almost utopian projection into the future, which, even if it was never to be expressed completely in Siqueiros' own work, would nevertheless find its rationale in the technological basis of post-war Western economic development.

There is a further important dimension to this mural. *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* is also a powerful critique of the age of the modern machine. In his Detroit cycle, Diego Rivera had viewed man and machine as a spectacle of dynamic productive synthesis. In *Catharsis*, on the other hand, Orozco had conceived industrial modernity as a monstrous oppression. The oppression, however, was given no other imagery than a mad internecine struggle and faceless, dehumanized mechanical figures. In Dartmouth and at Guadalajara, when Orozco focused on the modern ideologies as falsifiers and betrayers, the modern machine was not placed in the foreground as an integral part of the process; it was merely implicated. Siqueiros, on the other hand, highlighted his passionate denunciation of fascism by clothing its image in the garb of mechanical and industrial modernity. It was a combination that makes the mural all the more startling, for it eloquently expresses the appalling consequences of the combination of political despotism and the modern machine. During the 1930s each of the three muralists had views of the modern world, the age of industrial modernity. Each view was different, influenced by different concerns and visions. Importantly, their expressions of the modern industrial world created a dimension to their murals of these years that was located, not within the boundaries of an exclusively Mexican cultural reality, but in a setting of universal relevance.