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Diego Rivera: *A Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*. Fresco, 1947–8. Detail of left-hand side. Mexico City.

SIX

OROZCO AND RIVERA

1940–1957

If the two pre-war decades of the Mexican mural movement's history had essentially been two separate and defining periods, then the years from 1940 formed another distinct episode for the work of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. The instability created by the Second World War further enlisted the already strong tendency of the Mexican state to rule by exhortations to national unity. Forces within the state, weakened by the radical years of the Cárdenas presidency, reasserted themselves and as a consequence, the popular demands of the agrarian and labour movements went unanswered. After 1946, beginning with the Presidency of Miguel Alemán, Mexican politics consolidated this development. Foreign investment flourished in Mexico resulting in a major but very uneven economic expansion for the country. Such expansion was at a cost. Agrarian reform rapidly diminished, more equitable distribution of wealth and power was never realized, and the demands of labour organizations were as ruthlessly suppressed as they had been during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Throughout much of the post-war era, Mexico became increasingly enmeshed in the demands of the expanding foreign capital being used for national expansion. At the same time, the country's political autonomy was held within the overriding constraints of a post-war, east–west political conflict and the resulting regional demands placed on it by the all-powerful neighbouring United States.

The era of the Cold War created a cultural and economic environment which affected and influenced the work of all three painters in ways that were unpredictable and in many senses contradictory. The increasing influence of the United States on Mexican society in the years of McCarthyism had a particularly pressing impact on Mexican culture. The radical social rhetoric of the country's post-revolutionary art became increasingly less tolerated by the Mexican cultural establishment, a fact that helped to create the fertile ground on which the commercialized consumer culture of the United States could take root in Mexico. The enormous economic influence and power of the United States in the post-war period also provided the context for what has been called the third stage of the Mexican revolution, that of the 'consolidation' or 'modernization'.[1] During this period Mexican society was no longer exclusively defined by its traditional agrarian categories, but by others that were increasingly industrial, technologically advanced and modern.

The work of Mexico's three leading muralists must be seen against this post-war, Cold War context that was so profoundly different from the two pre-war decades. The relationship of the three artists was profoundly changed in the post-war period from what it had been at the outset of the movement. With the international recognition all three had gained from the murals that they had executed in the 1920s and 1930s in Mexico and the United States came a formalization of their relationship with the Mexican state. From radical young artists, barely tolerated by the government that had commissioned them in the early 1920s, all three artists in the post-war period came to be regarded by the

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Lazaro Cardenas addressing a political meeting in Michaocan, Mexico, 1934.

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José Clemente Orozco: *Allegory of Mexico*. Fresco, 1940. Gabino Ortiz Library, Jiquilpan, Michoacán.

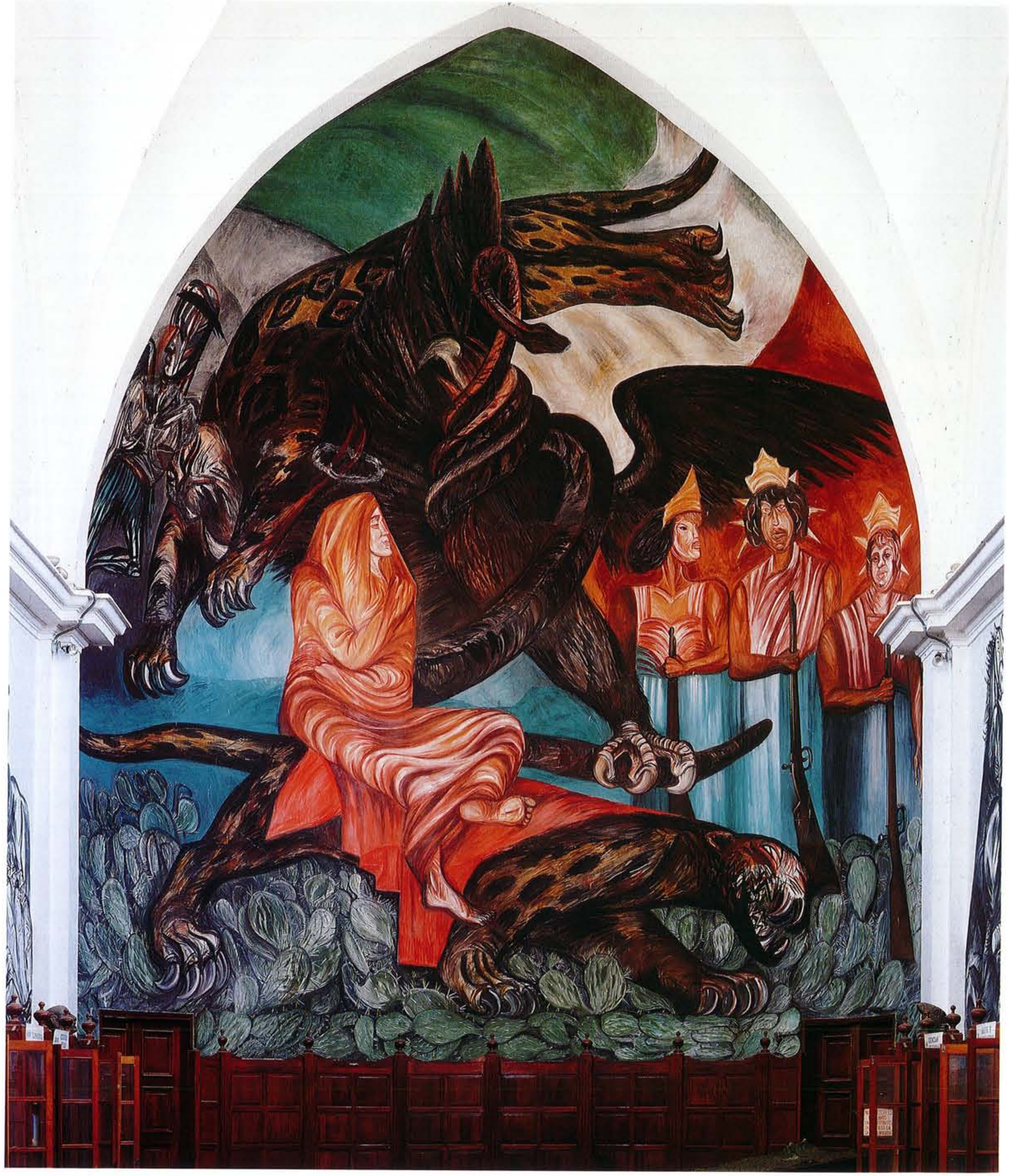
Mexican state as valuable cultural figureheads. Although this did not preclude controversy around their work, and nor did it prevent the Mexican government from gaoling Siqueiros for his political activities in 1960, all three painters enjoyed employment on prestigious artistic projects and commissions from various branches and organs of the state. As the creators of work that was regarded as part of the treasured National Patrimony, Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros gradually became institutionalized during the post-war period. This development profoundly affected the attitudes of younger radical artists, who were increasingly at odds with what they saw as the dogmas of cultural nationalism.[2] Driven by the desire to locate Mexican culture within a more open, cosmopolitan and international context, the younger generation of artists saw the work of the three muralists as representing these dogmas, a far cry from those who had earlier looked up to and been inspired by what they saw as an art movement of revolutionary cultural radicalism.[3]

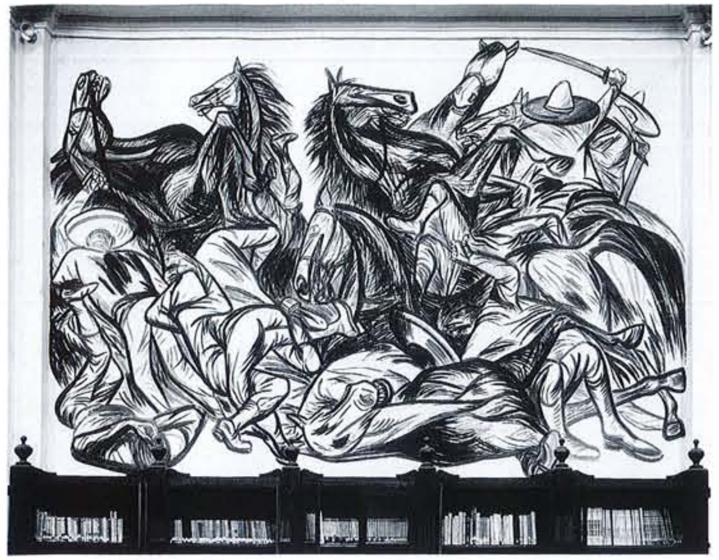
Although during this third stage of the development of mural painting each of the artists created a variety of murals with different themes and concerns, nevertheless all three remained centrally concerned with the subject of Mexico. But whereas the national theme had principally been used before 1940 as a way of examining the nation's history in order to explore and to forge a vision of the country's identity, in the post-war era it formed the basis of quite different preoccupations.

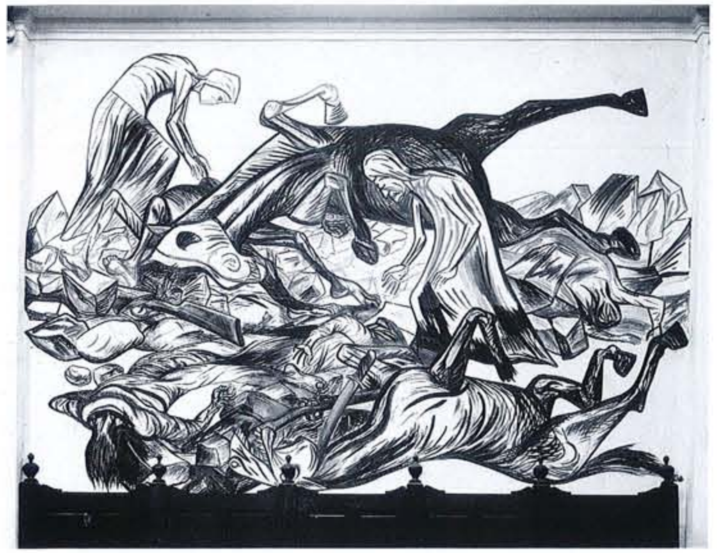
During the nine years from 1940 until his death in 1949, Orozco created four murals in which Mexico was the principal subject. These were the *Allegory of Mexico*, painted on the main end wall of the Gabino Ortiz library in Jiquilpan in 1940; *National Allegory*, painted in 1947 at the National Teachers' School in Mexico City; the 1948 fresco panel *Juárez, the Church and the Imperialists* painted at the National Museum of History in Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City; and the mural *Hidalgo: The Great Mexican Revolutionary Legislation and the Liberty of the Slaves*, which was painted in the Chamber of Deputies' Government Palace in Guadalajara, completed shortly before his death in 1949.[4]

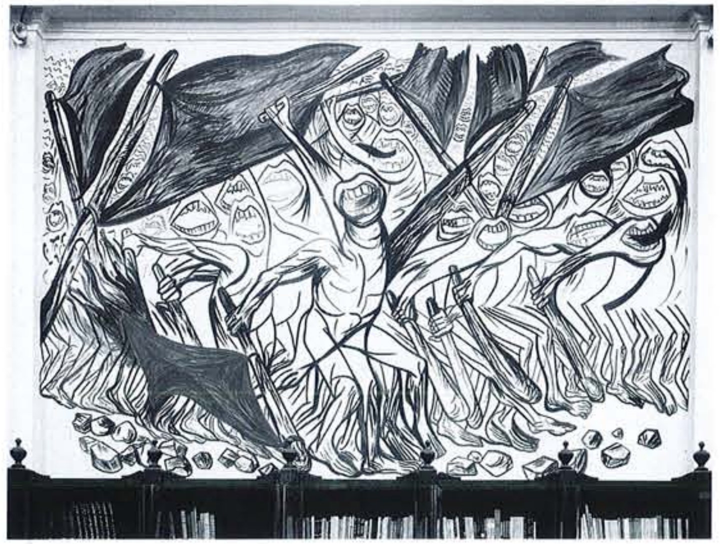
The *Allegory of Mexico* and the later *National Allegory*, painted on an external wall, are profoundly different from each other, despite sharing an identical theme. The first, in the Jiquilpan library in the State of Michoacán, is part of the cycle containing the celebrated black-and-white fresco panels on the theme of the revolution. Revolutionary struggle is depicted in them in the starkest terms. In two of the panels, *The Burial* and *After the Battle*, the shooting of the constitutionalist General Alvírez, and the execution of Madero's followers, both of which took place in Michoacán during the revolution, provide the thematic reference. Other panels include Orozco's uncompromisingly nihilistic view of the masses.

Of the main panel, *Allegory of Mexico*, the Mexican critic and writer Justinio Fernández has written: 'Orozco has projected here his concept of the Mexican – the painful, slow advance, the violence, the drama and dignity, evil and greatness; this human comedy – pretension without substance, religiosity without religion – and undefiled the true national conscience.'[5] *Allegory of Mexico* is in two respects quite different from previous murals that Orozco had painted with a specifically Mexican national theme. In earlier murals, such as in his work at the Hospicio Cabañas, Orozco's subject of Mexico and its history had been assembled out of many different images. No single image had stood for the whole; instead, each had been a component part, albeit often with immensely powerful and telling visual metaphors. Also, Orozco seldom used imagery derived so completely from the visual vocabulary of Mexican folklore as that which he employed in *Allegory of Mexico*. Furthermore, he had never before created a public work that seemed to express the









idea of a contemporary Mexico under what might easily be interpreted as an imperialist threat.

The central image of the mural depicts an eagle in the coils of a serpent. This ancient symbol of Mexico, representing the forces of night and day, life and death, battles with the symbolic power of the underworld. The deathly struggle is not resolved. Below, a female figure astride a jaguar rides her steed through an undergrowth of cacti. This triangular assemblage clearly symbolizes both a contemporary and ancient idea of Mexico, in which the dichotomy of proud and liberated independence against oppression is construed as the constant battle of forces for national definition. In the background, the huge red, white and green stripes of the national emblem further reinforce the intended symbol. The dichotomy is underlined by the menacing intervention, between the national emblem and this triangular assemblage, of an aggressive jaguar-like animal that arches round to attack the woman from behind. Bernard Myers describes this image as a 'voracious, hungry beast that symbolizes the menace of imperialism'.[6] On the right side of the mural, three female figures representing Law, Liberty and Justice stand as the guardians of an independent Mexico and its liberties. Painted during the first year of the Second World War, the mural seems to convey the idea of an independent Mexico constantly on guard against unspecified forces, that might threaten its integrity.

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José Clemente Orozco: *Battle*.
Fresco, 1940. Gabino Ortiz Library,
Jiquilpan, Michoacán.

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José Clemente Orozco: *After the Battle*. Fresco, 1930. Gabino Ortiz
Library, Jiquilpan, Michoacán.

171
José Clemente Orozco: *The Masses*.
Fresco, 1940. Gabino Ortiz Library,
Jiquilpan, Michoacán.

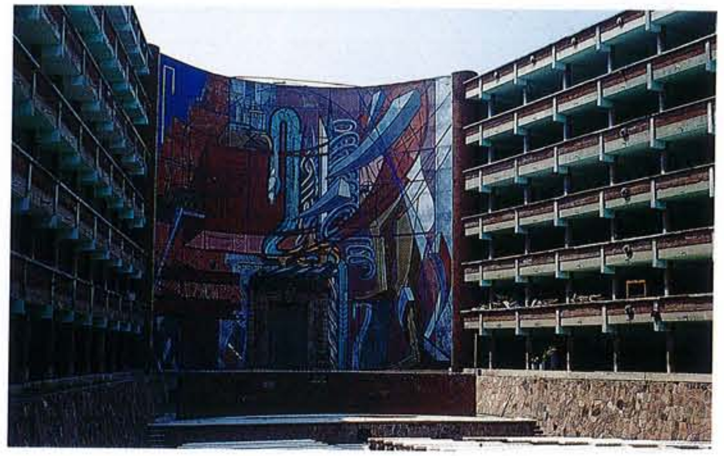
Although the work appears to mark an important stage in Orozco's development as a mature artist, compared to his previous achievements in Guadalajara, *Allegory of Mexico* is very uneven in quality. The compositional structure marvellously exploits the area bound by the arched panel, but the work as a whole is less synthesized than anything he painted in Guadalajara. The drawing of the figures, together with the expressive handling of the paint, often appears haphazard, thus losing its effective and expressive potential.

The second allegorical work on the subject of Mexico that Orozco painted in the 1940s was the external work at the National Teachers' School in Mexico City. Of all the murals that Orozco executed, *National Allegory* is unique. It is technically highly innovative in ways that Orozco had never attempted or envisaged in earlier work. Pictorially it is also a dramatic departure from his traditional figuration to a more formalized, almost abstract conception.

National Allegory was painted on a huge curved wall of the impressive open-air theatre of the National Teachers' School. Begun in November 1947 and completed in April 1948, the mural was the largest single image Orozco created, measuring 59 feet high and 72 feet across. Orozco described his ideas as

> *Theme*: National Allegory, with large geometric forms, stone and metal. *In the centre*: the Eagle and the Serpent, a representation of life and death, a representation of the Mexican earth. *At the left*, a man with his head in the clouds moves up a gigantic staircase; *at the right*, a hand puts a block into place. . . . The forms of the composition are organized so as to acknowledge and preserve the parabolic form of the wall and to be seen at a distance.[7]

The move to a more formalized, abstract, less illustrative figuration allowed Orozco to develop the composition and colour of this mural in correlation with the architecture within which the mural wall was located. In particular, he echoed the lateral forms and colour of the surrounding architecture of the theatre. Similarly, the large, abstract, knife-like forms on the upper left of the composition help to extend the dynamic of a receding perspective created by the tiers, which in turn centres the eye on the stage area behind which the mural is located. The lines of colour that Orozco created, which traverse the composition horizontally at various levels, also assist in creating a continuous and dynamic movement of form. The result is an extraordinary synthesis of pictorial and architectural form, in which both mural and architecture are combined and integrated into a whole. Although quite different in every other respect, Orozco's use of sight lines to enhance perspective and to direct the eye and unite one area with another, is very similar to the approach that Siqueiros adopted in *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*.



172
José Clemente Orozco: *National Allegory*. Ethyl silicate paint, 1948. Open-air theatre of the National Teachers' School, Mexico City.

It is perhaps ironic that it was Orozco who most completely and successfully realized, in this particular mural, Siqueiros' aim of plastic integration: the synthesis of architecture, painting and sculpture. Siqueiros had propagated this as one of his primary aims, particularly in the post-war period. Orozco, on the other hand, had never placed this among his main concerns. Yet at the National Teachers' School, in one dramatic example, he brought all three disciplines together into a balanced harmony to a degree that Siqueiros never achieved.[8]

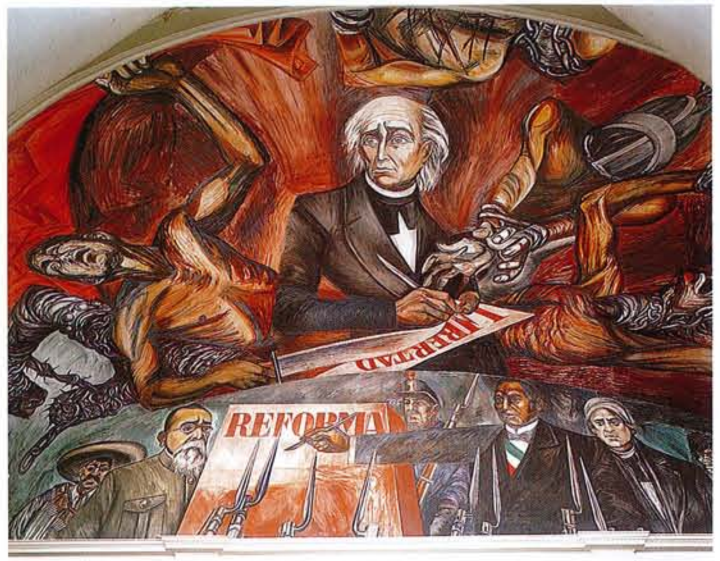
Apart from the innovatory formal approach Orozco adopted to express his theme, the other striking aspect of *National Allegory* is his use of new materials. Until the creation of *National Allegory*, Orozco had not chosen to use any medium in his murals other than fresco. However, in this mural he employed ethyl silicate. In part, the external siting of the mural, open to the weather, meant that the use of fresco was questionably viable in the long term, imposing upon Orozco the need to consider other materials and approaches. Siqueiros had been preoccupied with the need to

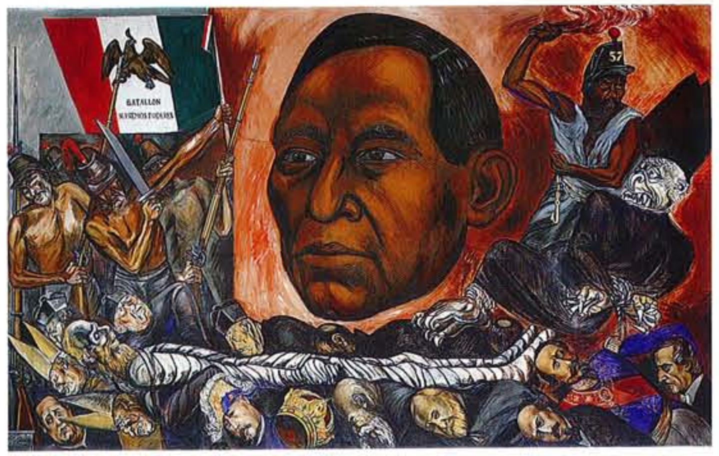
173 *top*
José Clemente Orozco: *Hidalgo and the Great Mexican Revolutionary Legislation and the Liberty of the Slaves.* Fresco, 1948–9. Chamber of Deputies, Legislative Assembly of Jalisco, Guadalajara.

174 *bottom*
José Clemente Orozco: *Juárez, the Church and the Imperialists.* Fresco, 1948. National Museum of History, Chapultepec Castle, Mexico City.

revolutionize the mural medium since the early 1930s, using a variety of approaches that ranged from painting on to cement to the use of nitrocellulose paint systems. By the time Orozco executed his commission at the National Teachers' School in the late 1940s, experimentation with different paint systems in Mexico had become well established. This research was being carried out principally at the Division of Research for Plastics in Mexico City's Polytechnic Institute, headed by Siqueiros' long-time technical collaborator, the chemist José Gutiérrez. Orozco was advised that ethyl silicate, with which Gutiérrez had been experimenting for ten years, was the appropriate medium for the commission.

National Allegory contained some of the same traditional and national folklore as *Allegory of Mexico*. The eagle and the serpent were present, with the latter again firmly held in the stylized talons of the eagle. The lower right area of the mural contains an assemblage of lines and forms representing the echoes of a pre-colonial past. Above, surrounding an image of a dark-skinned hand, is a further montage of structure lines describing the forms of modern construction and pre-Columbian pyramids. To the left of the central motif, huge, dagger-like images seem to press in and intimidate the two creatures symbolizing Mexico. Around the outer perimeter of the central doorway, the images of industrial drill bits are placed underneath the eagle's claws and adjacent to a highly formalized image of a wheat sheaf. Together with the huge figure of a man stepping out from what appear to be mechanical clasps, Orozco is once again exploring the conflicts and dilemmas of a symbolic image of Mexico, which seems to be threatened and transformed by the encroaching and oppressive realities of an aggressive technological world. In this respect, the visual metaphor is one that is familiar in the work of Orozco and that has its echoes in previous murals such as the panel in the Hospicio Cabañas depicting Cortez as a mechanical being standing above the prone figure of an Indian. However, in *Allegory of Mexico* and *National Allegory*, it is not an ancient Mexico threatened by an old colonialism, but a contemporary Mexico menaced by an as yet unspecified but very present modern threat that is depicted. The implicit threat in both of these allegorical works is left unstated; it might be a modern version of imperialism. It could equally be a foreboding of the dissolution of ancient





cultural roots at the hands of an inhuman industrial modernity. Whatever it is, Mexico is the target. After the completion of *National Allegory*, Orozco departed from the use of such strict allegory and returned to a more traditional, but highly expressive narrative to present his Mexican subject-matter.

In the final eighteen months of his life, Orozco created two murals centred not on the theme of a threatened Mexico but on Mexico and its liberators. These were his 1948 panel of *Juárez, the Church and the Imperialists*, painted in the Sala de la Reforma in the Museum of National History in Chapultepec Castle, Mexico City, and *Hidalgo and the Great Mexican Revolutionary Legislation and the Liberty of the Slaves*, painted in the Chamber of Deputies in Guadalajara.

In the first, Orozco constructed a gigantic portrait of Benito Juárez. Surrounding the face of Mexico's great nineteenth-century Indian President of the Reform is a curious scene depicting the clerical and military supporters of Napoleonic rule in Mexico in the nineteenth century.[9] These traitors carry the hideously elongated and mummified body of their puppet Emperor, Maximilian. Above them, to the left and right of Juárez' face, this pathetic assortment of conspiratorial instigators are attacked by the soldiers of the Mexican independence and rebellion.

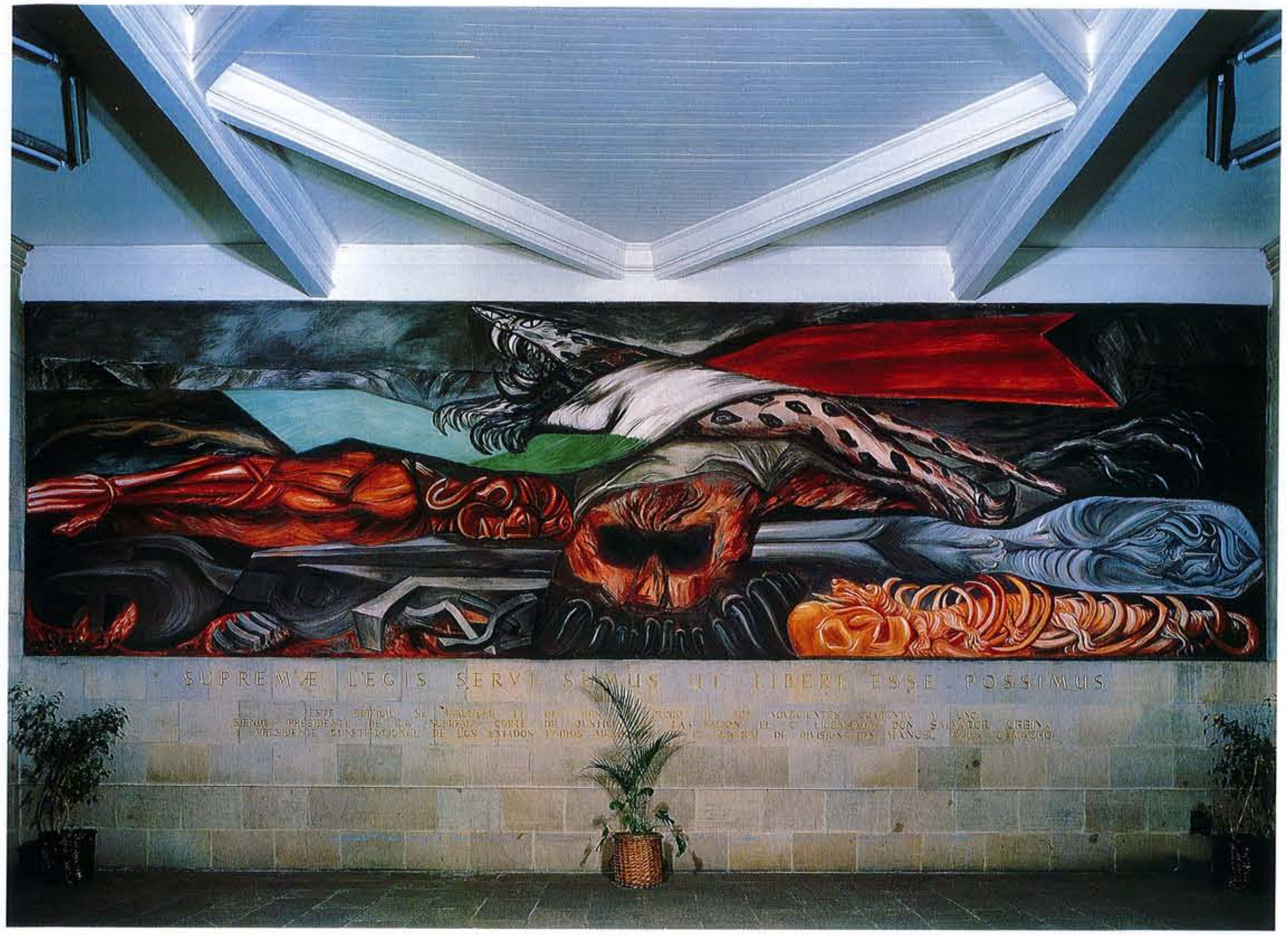
In this late mural, the objects of Orozco's biting critique are presented in terms that recall the savage images he had created 25 years earlier in the National Preparatory School. Then, on the first floor of the building, his targets had been reactionary forces, false leaders, effete and pompous aristocrats, a catalogue of loathsome individuals. In the later mural, his targets are again quite specific, but this time they are traitors to Mexican liberty and independence. They are presented in the same cartoon-like drawings that Orozco had used before, recalling his work as a caricaturist.

Orozco had not dealt in previous murals with the subject or theme of nineteenth-century Mexican political history. To do so in the late 1940s would seem to imply a need to recognize the parallels of historical circumstance, yet on the surface, no such parallels existed. Mexico was independent, and not occupied by any foreign power, or ruled by foreign usurpers. Perhaps Orozco was articulating an underlying national unease as the nation rapidly found itself in the post-war era, in which the international political landscape placed questions over such great ideals as liberation, national integrity and independence. In such circumstances, the huge and benign figure of Juárez seems to stand not only as the antithesis of the Napoleonic adventurers of the nineteenth century and their Mexican supporters, who compromised the independence of a recently liberated Mexico, but also as a symbol of stability and integrity in an uncertain age.

In *Hidalgo and the Great Mexican Revolutionary Legislation and the Liberty of the Slaves*, Orozco, at the very end of his life, returned to the other great Mexican figure of the nineteenth century, Manuel Hidalgo. Ten years earlier, on the magnificent main staircase of the governor's palace in Guadalajara, Orozco had depicted Hidalgo as a messianic figure of liberation in what is perhaps the single greatest work of the Mexican mural movement. As the instigator of the long struggle for national independence, Hidalgo was also responsible for decreeing the abolition of slavery in Mexico, the first decree of its kind on the American continent. It is this that forms the central theme of the last mural of Orozco's life. The Hidalgo of this last work is a more gentle figure, the messianic quality of the earlier portrayal here transferred to the images of the slaves, who, bound in chains with hands tied, present some of the most agonized expressions of want and suffering that Orozco created. The mural was completed in August 1949. A few weeks later, on 7 September Orozco died of heart failure at his home in Guadalajara.

Throughout his final years, Orozco had revisited many of the themes and expressed many of the preoccupations present in his pre-war mural work. The familiar theme of justice, and the nightmare of a chaotic, exploitative and aggressive modernity had been powerfully expressed in his cycles at the Supreme Court in Mexico City in 1941, and at the old colonial Chapel of Jesús Nazareno in Mexico City in 1942.[10]

At the Supreme Court, Orozco was presented with a series of awkwardly placed panels surrounding the stairs of the building, in the so-called Hall of Lost Steps. He painted the struggles for justice and the corruption of justice in these panels in a series of powerful images entitled *Justice*, *False Justice*, *Proletarian Struggle*, and *National Riches*.[11] In *National Riches*, Orozco seemed to repeat part of the ideas embedded in *Allegory of Mexico* at the Gabino



Ortíz Library. Once again, a Mexican jaguar-like animal wrapped in the national colours appears, here ferociously defending the symbols of Mexico's wealth. In *Justice* and *False Justice*, painted in panels flanking the stairs, Orozco depicted the first as an avenging angel striking down corruption, while opposite, its counterpart lies slumped and asleep in a chair oblivious to the corrupters below. In the panel facing the stairs, Orozco depicted *Proletarian Struggle* as yet another conflict to effect the liberty of the oppressed.[12]

The cycle of frescoes that Orozco painted in the Chapel of Jesús Nazareno, begun immediately after the completion of those in the Supreme Court, were never completed. He worked on the cycle until 1944, when funds for the work dried up. As a result, Orozco managed to paint only a few sections in the vault area around the choir. Created during the height of the Second World War, Orozco's *Allegory of the Apocalypse in Modern Times* expresses all of Orozco's sense of anguish, anxiety and dread of a modern world out of control, hurtling towards a cultural abyss. The spirit of the panels is summed up in the image of the Whore of the Apocalypse, a grotesque, laughing figure riding a jaguar – Orozco's repeated symbol of Mexico.

This last period of Orozco's life did not result in mural work as spectacular as that which he had produced in Guadalajara between 1936 and 1939. Nevertheless, it was a productive time during which he also created a number of important easel works, now in the Orozco family collection, such as *Mask with Butterfly* in 1947, and *Metaphysical Landscape* and *The Slave*, both in 1948. Throughout the murals of this final period, Orozco seems to have searched for a different voice with which to express the reality of a new age. Yet he still appeared acutely dissatisfied with the biting visual vocabulary that had become so familiar a part of the language of his public expression. In 1947 he wrote that

175
José Clemente Orozco: *National Riches*. Fresco, 1941. Supreme Court of Justice, Mexico City.

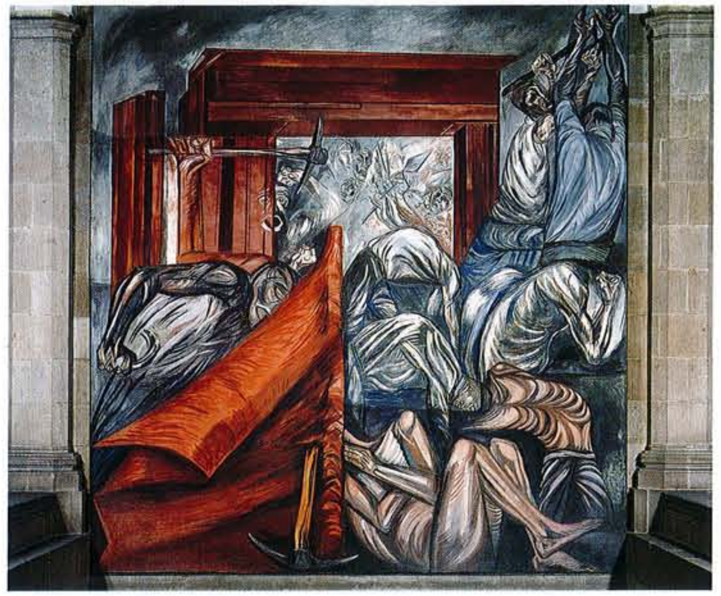
176
José Clemente Orozco: *Proletarian Struggle*. Fresco, 1941. Supreme Court of Justice, Mexico City.

> there is the trend of revolutionary socialist propaganda, in which there continues to appear with surprising persistancy, Christian iconography . . . superficially modernized; perhaps rifles and machine guns in place of bows and arrows; aeroplanes instead of angels; flying atomic bombs in place of divine damnation. . . . To all this outdated religious imagery very nineteenth-century liberal symbols are added. . . . Very ancient symbols of the 'Bourgeoisie, enemy of progress' type still play a prominent part in murals represented by pot-bellied toffs in top hats or by pigs, jackals, dragons or other monsters; so well known and so familiar that they are as inoffensive as the plumed serpent.[13]

In the last two works, and particularly in the murals he had painted in the Supreme Court and the Chapel of Jesús Nazareno, Orozco had certainly reverted to form. Yet the extraordinary departure from that norm in the conceptualization of his external mural, *National Allegory*, at the National Teachers' School, had been dramatic evidence of the potential that Orozco had for a new visual vocabulary to express his ideas.

By the time Orozco died in 1949, the relative positions of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros had changed dramatically from those they held in the first decade of the mural movement's history. Orozco, who had been forced to leave Mexico in 1926 in order to earn a living in America, had returned in 1934, a fully mature painter. In Guadalajara, during the latter half of the 1930s, his murals had brought him to the pinnacle of his career. The work that he did during the 1940s sustained his stature and his reputation as one of the most powerful painters the American continent had ever produced.

Conversely, Diego Rivera, after his return to Mexico in 1934, and in the wake of the controversy surrounding the débâcle of the Rockefeller mural, moved into a kind of exile from the movement in which he had played so central a part, and which in the 1920s had largely been defined by the work that he had produced. In part, Rivera's exile was made more intense by the extent to which former colleagues and comrades within the communist movement ostracized him. He had become the target of intense political criticism. Indeed, his position during the late 1930s placed him in further confrontation with those on the left who supported Stalin and the Soviet Union, when Rivera persuaded the then President of Mexico, Lazaro Cárdenas, to let Leon Trotsky seek exile in Mexico.[14]



Following his return from the United States in 1934, and having recreated *Man at the Crossroads* at the newly completed Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City and completed the left-hand wall of his *History of Mexico* at the National Palace, Rivera confined himself largely to easel painting.[15] It was only in 1940, when he returned to the United States to undertake the commission for the *Pan-American Unity* mural for the San Francisco Golden Gate Exhibition that he began to work again as a mural painter.[16]

Pan-American Unity forms an interesting comparison with the work of Orozco at Dartmouth College. Like Orozco, Rivera expressed his theme as the development of the American continent. His interpretation included not only the contribution of the Indian and *mestizo* peoples to that culture, but that of the European as well. Rivera expressed the cultural dualities of this American identity in the mural's dominant central image – here depicted as a giant figure constructed from the different forms of Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess of earth and death, and a huge modern industrial pressing machine. On either side of this symbolic motif, Rivera drew a series of images representing the evolution of the continent from its Indian roots to the age of modern industry. But unlike Orozco, who painted a devastating

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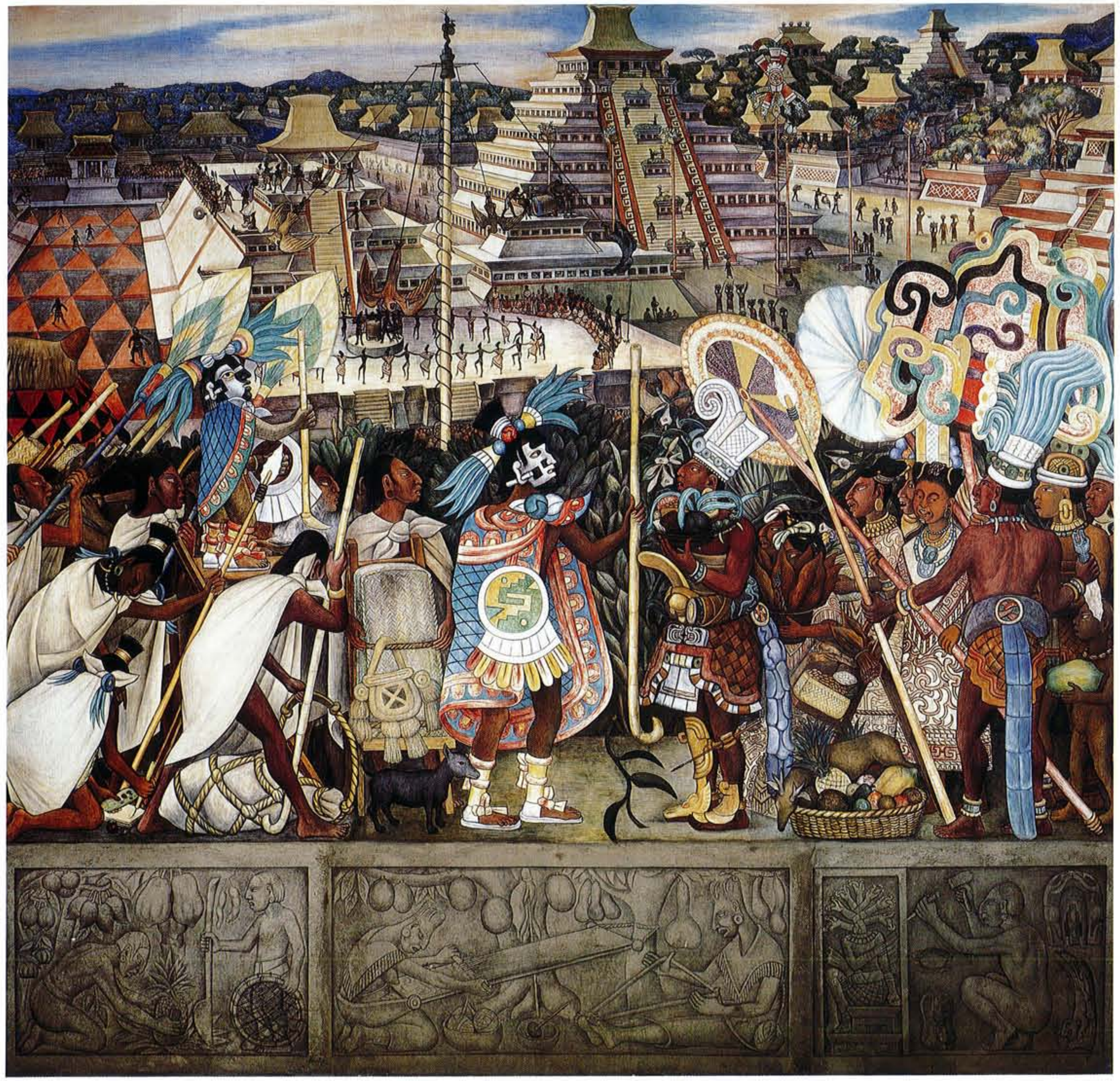
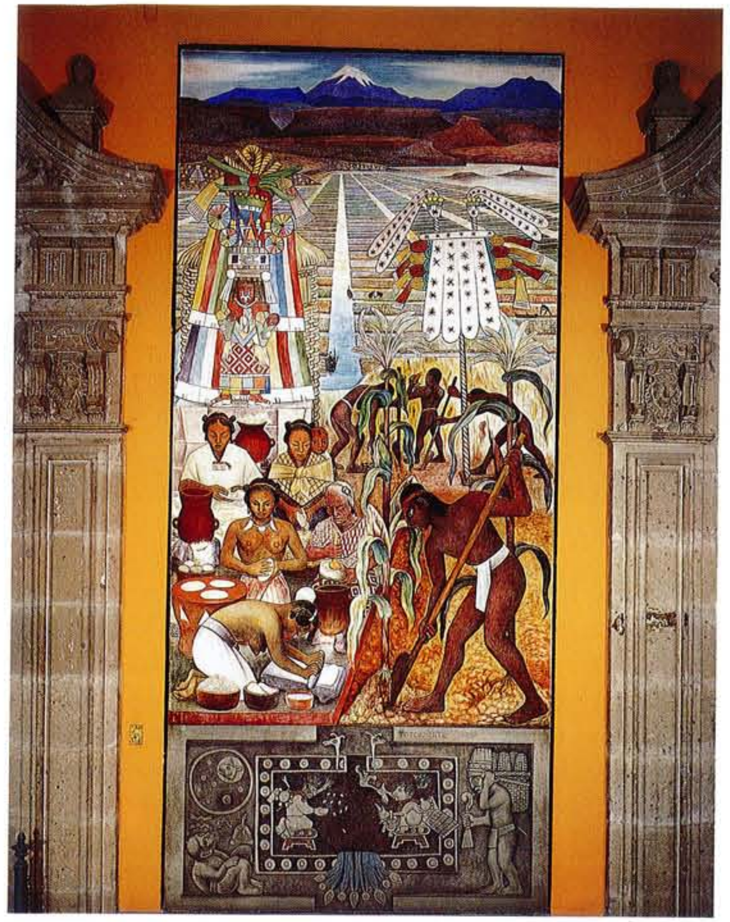
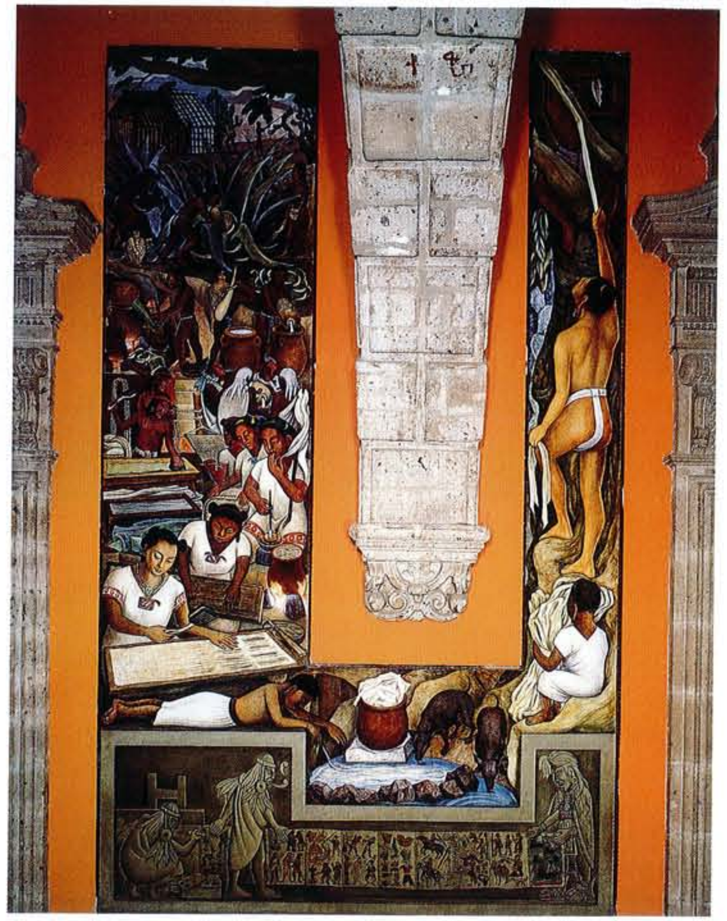
Diego Rivera: *Totonac Civilization*.
Fresco, 1950. National Palace,
Mexico City.



178
Diego Rivera: *Huastec Civilization*.
Fresco, 1950. National Palace,
Mexico City.

179
Diego Rivera: *The Papermakers*.
Fresco, 1950. National Palace,
Mexico City.





conclusion to his *History of the American Continent*, with the famous image of an angry Christ returned to hack down his cross, Rivera's portrayal is, like many of his other American murals, optimistic and celebratory. His only allusion to the world conflict of the time is the small lampoon of fascism at the bottom of the mural, which he painted in grisaille.

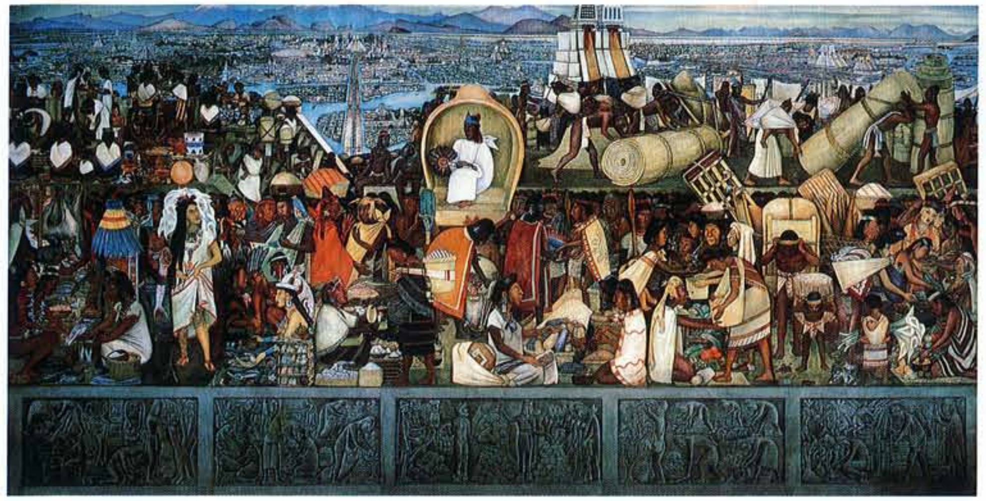
However, the main characteristics of Rivera's late murals are to be found at the National Palace, to which he returned in 1942. In the context of the rapidly modernizing and changing Mexican society, Rivera's work during the 1940s and 1950s witnessed an intense involvement with the theme of Mexico. However, it was an involvement that increasingly looked inwards and backwards; it was often nostalgic and highly idealistic. Indeed, the paradox of Rivera's later murals is that while his work of the 1920s and 1930s closely reflected the impact of contemporary events and thinking, the murals that he created during the 1940s and 1950s increasingly distanced themselves in content as well as style from such realities.[17]

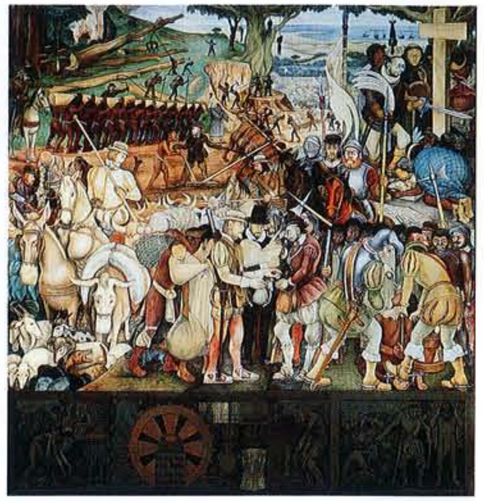
The murals that Rivera painted from 1942 to 1951 along the open corridors of the first floor of the National Palace were originally intended to link the indigenous origins of the country with what Rivera described as its Socialist aspirations. As it was, the cycle was never finished for Rivera only completed eleven of the panels, two of which are introductory panels in grisaille. The common characteristic of this cycle at the National Palace is the concentration on the subject and theme of pre-Columbian life

180 *below*
Diego Rivera: *The Great City of Tenochtitlan*. Fresco, 1945. National Palace, Mexico City.

181 *below right*
Diego Rivera: *The Disembarkation at Veracruz*. Fresco, 1951. National Palace, Mexico City.

182 *opposite*
Diego Rivera: *A Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*. Fresco, 1947–8. Mexico City.



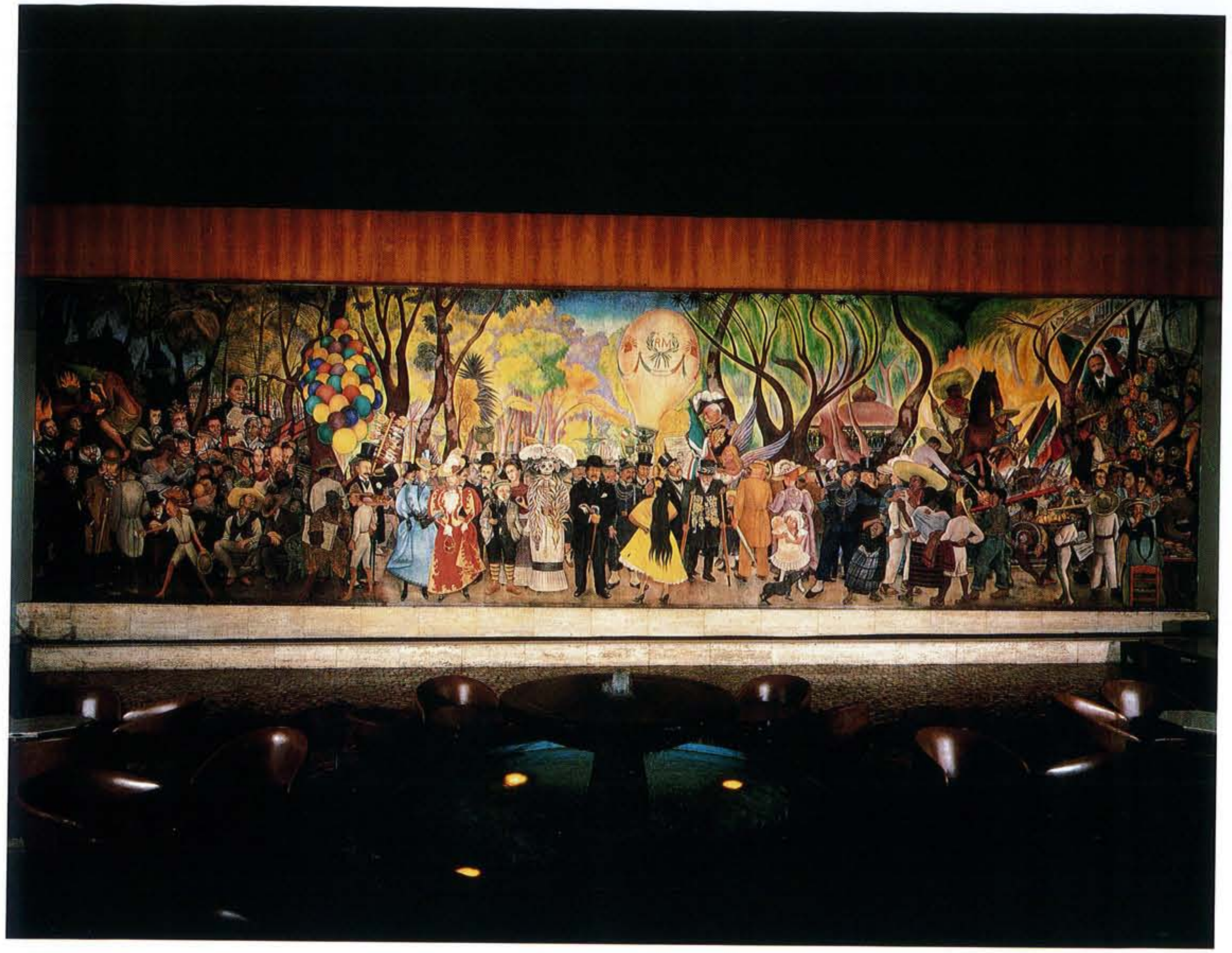


and civilizations. This dimension of the cycle is particularly significant, for Rivera was becoming increasingly absorbed by the need to picture these themes, not so much as political evolution, but as the fundamental core of a Mexican identity. In this sense, Rivera was giving expression to a conservative, almost nostalgic vision that he could never have experienced, but with which he nevertheless increasingly identified.

In the panel *The Great City of Tenochtitlan*, as in the others of the cycle, Rivera depicted the scene in great detail. The images appear as if they were faithful historical documents, thoroughly researched and correct in every detail. As Rivera later wrote, 'I took grave care to authenticate every detail by exact research, because I wanted to leave no opening for anyone to discredit the murals as a whole by the charge that any detail was a fabrication.'[18] His commitment to an authentic view of pre-Columbian life was closely associated with his sense of *indigenismo*. This had always been reflected in his need to present the pre-Hispanic world as idyllic. But now Rivera portrayed it as a society of great abundance, without hunger or poverty, an approach that Bertram Wolfe described as 'the return of the feathered serpent as a symbol of recurrence of tribal communism on a higher plane'.[19] Viewed in this context, Rivera's images stand as visual, political and economic apologia for a cultural return to the fundamental, and, for Rivera, socially radical roots of a Mexican identity.

Nowhere is this allusion to Mexico's indigenous past more clearly synthesized than in the relationship between the panels of *The Great City of Tenochtitlan* of 1945 and that of *The Disembarkation at Veracruz*, painted in 1951. Both panels show political and cultural epochs that are as much identified with colonial subjugation and oppression as they are with civilization and culture. Yet in the panel of Tenochtitlan there is 'no hint of Aztec imperialism, which the market symbolizes. Tribute and sacrificial victims were brought to Tenochtitlan from the subject peoples.'[20] By contrast, in the disembarkation panel, Cortez is depicted as a hideous, syphilitic being, and the world that he brings as one of murder, torture and slavery. Unlike the cycle painted by Orozco in the Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara, here Rivera magnified the oppressive, exploitative character of the Spanish conquest by choosing not to reflect the equally exploitative and cruel character of Mexico's indigenous past.

If Rivera projected a view of Mexico's past as an idyll in this later cycle of frescoes, then the next work he created for a public site in 1947 transposes that idyll into a kind of personal nostalgia. In this huge work, Rivera portrays a landscape with himself as a child standing against a backdrop of Mexican history. This history is drawn from his childhood memories alongside the prominent personalities of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexican history.



Entitled *A Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*, the mural was commissioned for the main lobby of the Alameda Hotel which stands directly opposite the Alameda Park in the heart of Mexico City.[21] When it was completed, it proved to be one of the great masterpieces of Rivera's later years. In the densely packed composition, at the centre of the mural, Diego Rivera painted himself as a young boy. He is portrayed holding hands with a *calavera* or skeleton, who in turn is holding the hand of Rivera's childhood mentor, the Mexican engraver José Guadalupe Posada. Directly behind, but still part of this group, is the figure of Rivera's wife, the painter Frida Kahlo. In the foreground, surrounding these figures, are scenes representing the poor and the destitute of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Rivera took these scenes from his experiences as a child, showing pickpockets, street urchins, newspaper vendors and Indian peasants plying their trades and being ejected from the park by the dictator's police. This is society's underclass, on whose behalf the revolution was made. Rivera contrasts them with the well-dressed figures representing Mexico's ruling class, which he placed in the mural composition's middle ground.

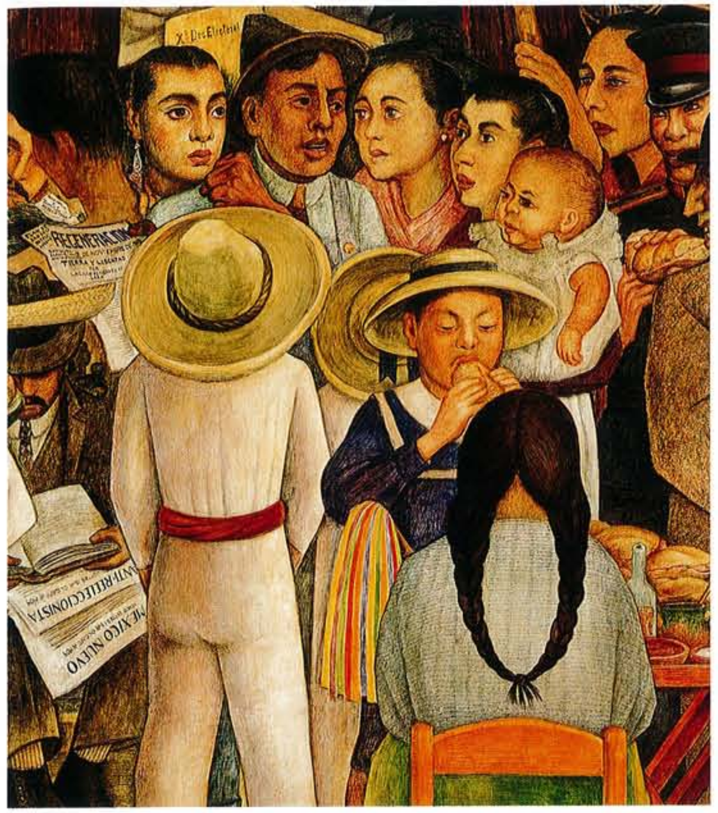
Sweeping up towards the left, Rivera created an assemblage of colonial and nineteenth-century figures, placing a scene of the Spanish Inquisition on the left-hand side of them.[22] Rivera also pictured the major figures of this period of Mexico's history in this area, including Cortez, Maximilian and Carlotta, together with the figure of General Scott, the American whose forces invaded Mexico in the 1840s, and whose troops camped in the Alameda in 1847.[23]

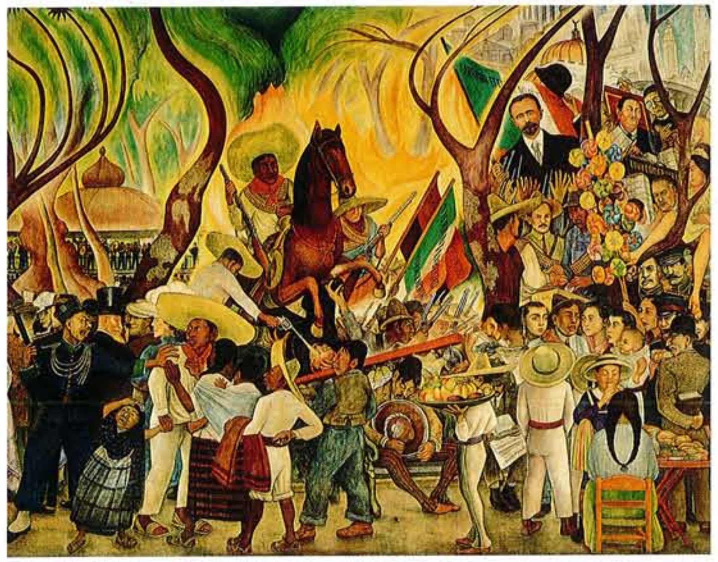
In contrast, on the right-hand side of the mural Rivera constructed a crowd of people that represents the world of Mexico's revolt against the oppression of colonialism and dictatorship. Among the most significant are Zapata, mounted on his horse,

183 & 184 *top & bottom*
Diego Rivera: *A Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*. Fresco, 1947–8. Detail of right-hand side. Alameda Hotel, Mexico City.

185 *below*
Diego Rivera at work on the mural *A Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*.

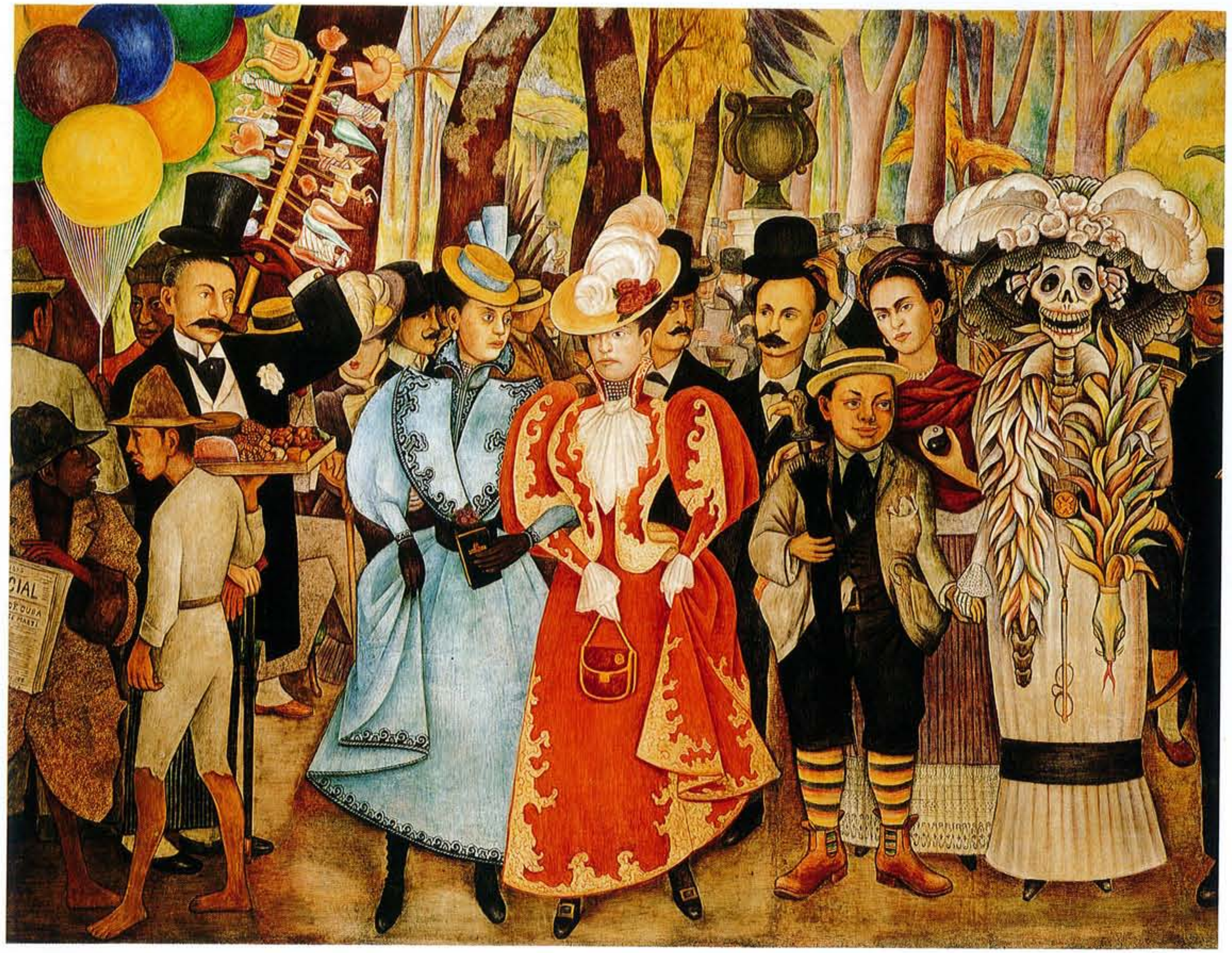
186 *opposite*
Diego Rivera: *A Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*. Fresco, 1947–8. Detail of centre. Alameda Hotel, Mexico City.





and the revolution's instigator, Francisco Madero, together with portraits of Rivera's family by his first wife, Lupe Marín. Rivera's decision to include his family in this area of the composition, in addition to Kahlo and Posada in the centre, emphasizes his extraordinary joining of fantasy and fact in his reminiscences and his thematic narrative. The resulting atmosphere of intense nostalgia is underpinned by the golden colouring. The trees that Rivera painted appear almost like a theatrical curtain and the extraordinary array of historical figures, family and friends like actors taking their final curtain call at the end of a great performance.

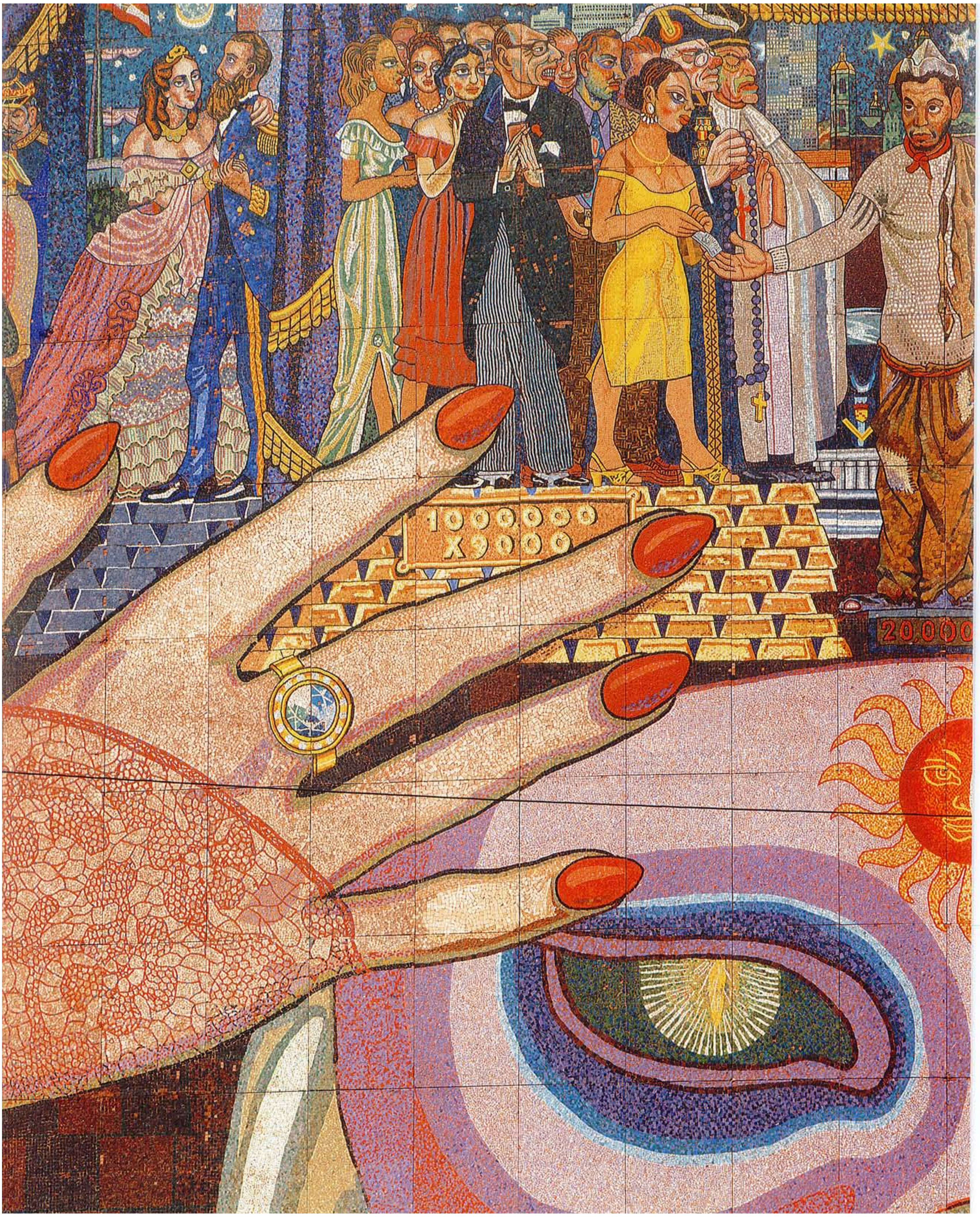
Of the many murals that Rivera painted, the Alameda work is unique in the extent to which it interlaces autobiography and fantasy. Although ten more years of his life remained, this mural appears almost like a valedictory statement. After nearly a quarter of a century as a mural painter, Rivera had presented his



public with a panorama of everything that had formed his character. Strikingly, however, he included almost nothing that was not Mexican, and apart from his family with Lupe Marín, and his portrait of Frida, he incorporated only three personalities that extended beyond his early life. These included Luís Martínez Rodríguez (at the top on the far right of the picture), the then archbishop of Mexico City; José Vasconcelos (in the centre of this right-hand group) and Manuel Martínez, his assistant (next to Vasconcelos). As with his allusions to Mexican national identity at the National Palace, which he was still painting at the time of this mural, Rivera located and defined himself before the intervention of the world of modern and contemporary experience.

Although *A Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park* contains none of the fierce rhetoric of many of Rivera's earlier works, its completion nevertheless met with a storm of protest because of the words that he had shown on a placard held by the figure of the nineteenth-century Mexican philosopher, Ignacio Ramírez. The offending words, 'God does not exist', had been uttered by Ramírez during a lecture delivered to the Letrán Academy in 1836. On seeing them, the archbishop, Luís Martínez Rodríguez, refused to bless the newly-built hotel in which the fresco had been painted. Outraged Catholic students attacked the mural, damaging the figure in the centre representing the young Rivera. The students also scratched out the offending words painted on the placard.[24]

Rivera's intense involvement with the past continued in other murals of this period, such as his two fresco panels on the history of cardiology, painted in 1944 in the Centro Médico, his large 1953 mural in the Hospital de la Raza, and the mosaic work *A Popular History of Mexico*, executed the same year for the façade of the Teatro de los Insurgentes, all in Mexico City.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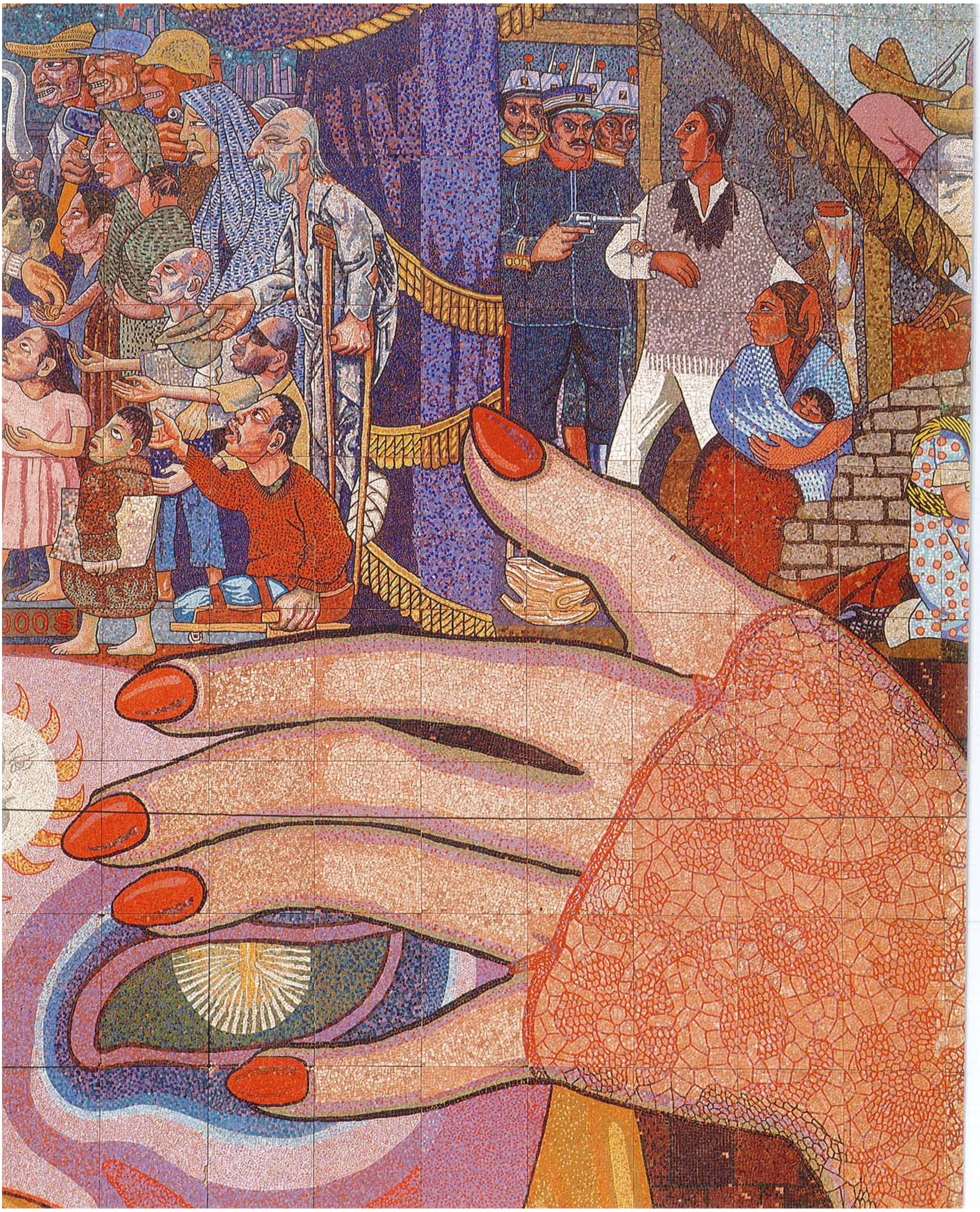
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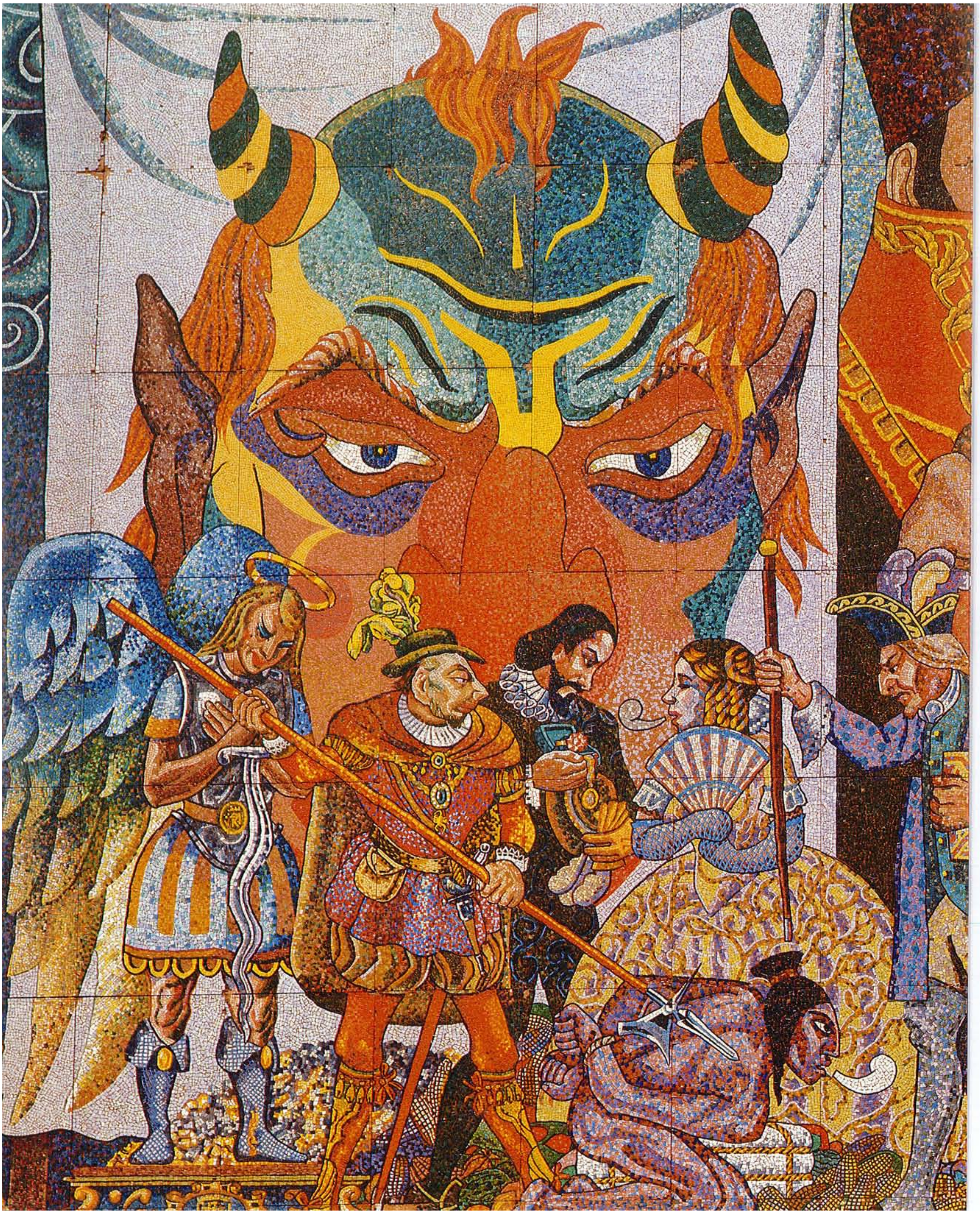
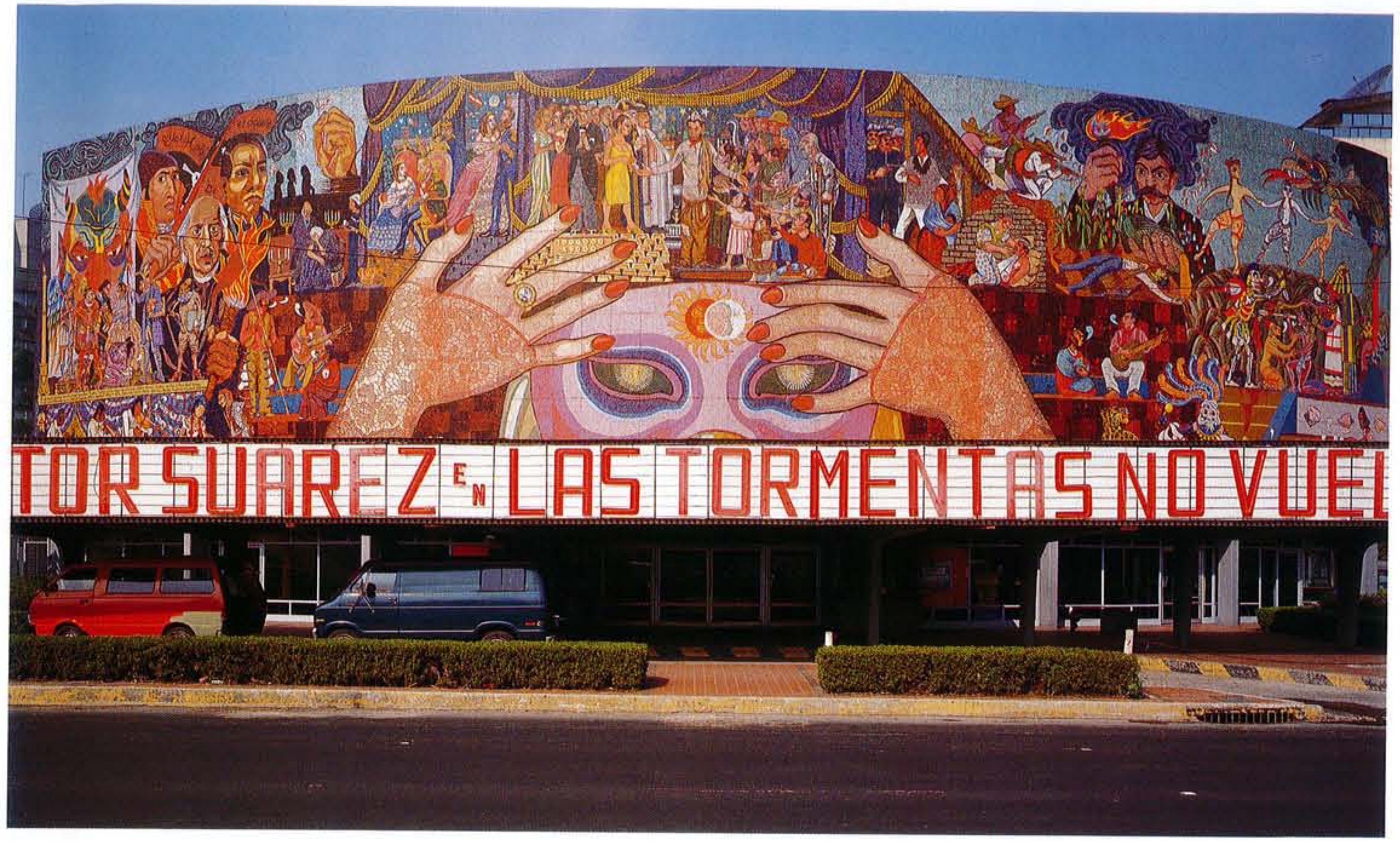


187 *previous pages*
Diego Rivera: *A Popular History of Mexico* (detail). Mosaic, 1953. Teatro de los Insurgentes, Mexico City.

188 *opposite*
Diego Rivera: *A Popular History of Mexico* (detail). Mosaic, 1953. Teatro de los Insurgentes, Mexico City.

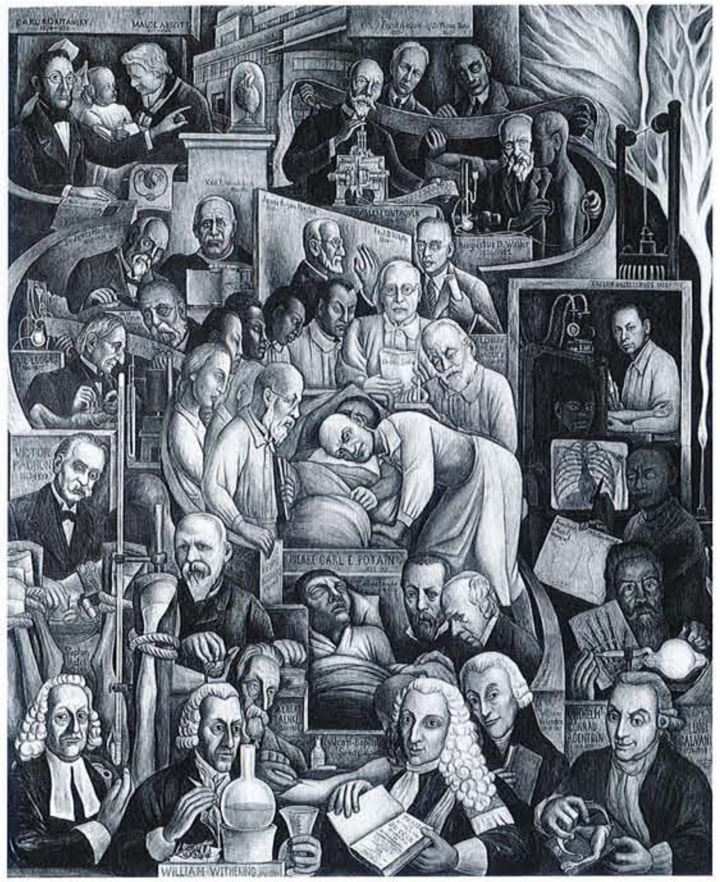
189 *below*
Diego Rivera: *A Popular History of Mexico*. Mosaic, 1953. Teatro de los Insurgentes, Mexico City.



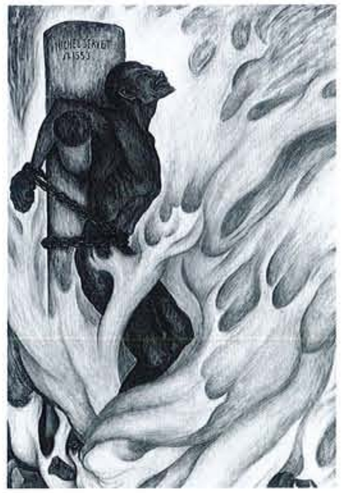
Rivera presented his theme on the façade of the Teatro de Los Insurgentes in a raucous, almost music-hall vein. Using the famous and much-loved Mexican comic actor, Cantinflas, as a central component, Rivera created a scene of satire and amusement. He portrayed Cantinflas taking money from the rich and giving it to the poor against a background of Mexican history, which included the great Mexican figures of liberty and independence, Hidalgo and Juárez. With its highly public setting, on one of the busiest avenues in Mexico City, and with its garish colouring, the giant mosaic mural evokes the populist spirit of the comic papers which Rivera so loved.

Although, like the Alameda mural, *A Popular History of Mexico* did not appear controversial or offensive, it nevertheless upset many people. In this case, the criticism concerned the image of Cantinflas, which Rivera had placed directly in front of the towers and stars of the sacred symbol of Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the drawings that he had prepared for the mural, he also depicted Cantinflas wearing the emblem of the Virgin. Devout Catholics interpreted Rivera's concept as a blasphemous portrayal of Juan Diego, the Indian in front of whom the Virgin is believed to have appeared on three occasions.[25]

A Popular History of Mexico was an attempt by Rivera at populist historical narrative. By comparison, his treatment of history in his two medical murals is more significant and thematically complex. The differences between the two works also highlight the extent to which Rivera called upon the racial and social roots of his country to present a radical version of contemporary Mexican politics.



190
Diego Rivera: *A History of Cardiology – Modern Cardiology*. Fresco, 1943–4. Institute of Cardiology, Mexico City.



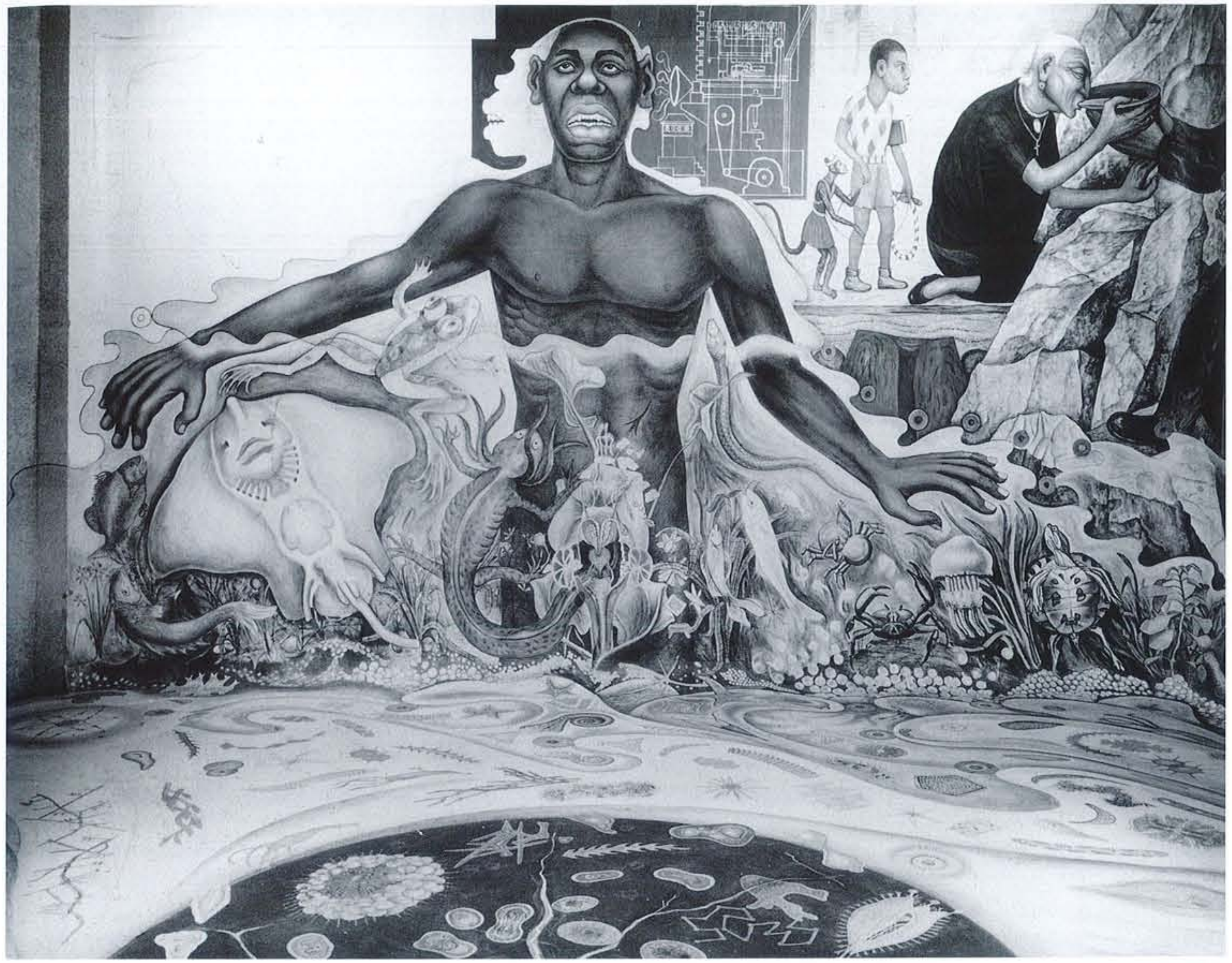
191
Diego Rivera: *A History of Cardiology – Ancient Cardiology*. Fresco, 1943–4. Institute of Cardiology, Mexico City.

192
Diego Rivera: *A History of Medicine*. Fresco, 1953. La Raza Hospital, Mexico City.

The frescoes of *A History of Cardiology* were Rivera's first public commissions since undertaking the four fresco panels for the Pani family in 1936. He painted a double panel based on a thoroughly researched history of the heart and the circulation of the blood. The first panel represents cardiac medicine in ancient times; the companion panel shows its modern development. Both are semi-spiral compositions containing a mass of life-sized figures representing the great names of cardiac medicine. In a manner that parallels the faithful documentation of historical fact displayed by Rivera in his frescoes along the patio corridors of the National Palace, *A History of Cardiology* gives the impression of an illustrated medical thesis. Yet Rivera still managed to achieve passages of great depth and expressive power in these two mural panels. The image in the first, left-hand panel, depicting the execution of the sixteenth-century anatomist, Michel Servet, who was burned at the stake for his theories on the circulation of the blood, is particularly strong.

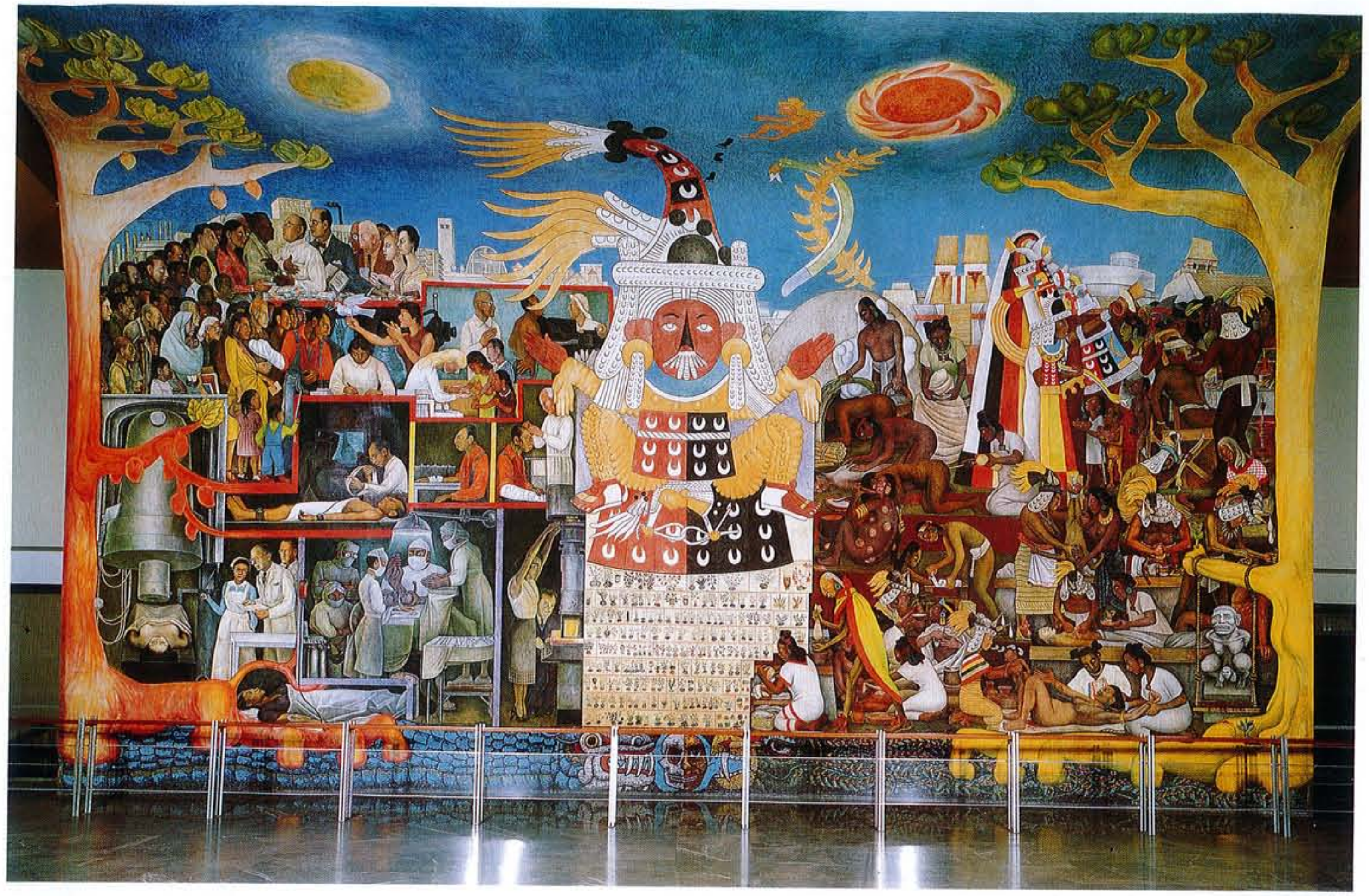
Ten years later, in the Hospital de la Raza, Rivera again demonstrated his knowledge of the history of medicine.[26] Here, however, he contextualized his theme by providing a background in which he juxtaposed images of modern scientific medicine with those of pre-Columbian cures and practices. The central image of the mural features the figure of Tlazoltéotl, the Aztec goddess who was believed to absorb dirt and remove debris through physical attachment.[27] To her right, Rivera painted a minutely detailed display of the practices and rituals of ancient Indian medicine. Dominated by the figure of Izcuitl, the goddess of medicine, it is imbued with the same nostalgia with which he depicted pre-Columbian civilization at the National Palace.[28]

On the left-hand side of the mural, Rivera portrayed contrasting images of twentieth-century medical practice and science. He divided his sub-theme at the top of this area by juxtaposing scenes of medicine for profit, which only the wealthy are able to afford, and scenes of a socialized, freely available medicine for all. The contrast between the images of abundance and the egalitarian spirit in the scenes portraying the medicine of the ancient Indians, and those of white-skinned plutocrats staring grim-faced at the free distribution of modern medical services to the dark-skinned poor, is particularly telling. Through the use of



Although the work is badly deteriorated, after the Alameda mural, it is perhaps the most significant achievement of Rivera in the post-war period.[29] Like Siqueiros at this time, Rivera conceived of the mural as more than mere painting on a flat surface. He envisaged it as a total environment in which paint would cover every surface, and the design would be visually and thematically linked to the architecture of the site and to the sculptural concept created outside. Together with the polychrome reliefs that he made for the exterior of the Olympic Stadium in Mexico City in 1952, the Río Lerma mural constituted a radical departure from his previous work, for throughout his life he had been associated with the use of traditional materials and techniques. However, Rivera's failing health prevented any further incursions into innovatory design concepts or new materials or methods.

When Rivera began painting murals in the 1920s, Mexico had just emerged from a largely agrarian revolution. In those early years, his public mural works had closely mirrored the political and intellectual atmosphere of Mexican society at the time. Revolutionary imagery and the reassertion of traditions and cultural roots were closely reflected in the style, themes and subjects of his murals. However, in the post-war period, Mexico's revolutionary culture became transformed and to a certain extent absorbed by the demands of a modern political, industrial and commercial culture.[30] The old indigenous and revolutionary values of the 1920s and 1930s appeared to be increasingly at odds with the progress of this 'new' Mexican reality, which was far more urban and metropolitan in its characteristics and concerns. In the United States in the 1930s, Rivera had been transfixed by the image of the modern industrial age. For him it was not only



visual juxtaposition, Rivera once again skilfully synthesized his notion of an ideal ancient Indian egalitarianism with a modern vision of radical socialist practice. The result is resonant with ideological and nationalistic overtones.

Ever since Rivera had painted the Detroit cycle of frescoes, he had demonstrated his particular ability to absorb information about science and technology and to weave into it connections with the past and the origins of life. The evolution of the natural world meant as much to him as its counterpart in the human and social world, and the relationship between the two is the basis of much of his most evocative imagery. At the Agricultural School at Chapingo, nearly three decades before, Rivera had painted a hymn to the earth. In 1951, at the Rio Lerma waterworks in Mexico City, he turned his attention to the theme of water, its life-creating properties and its relationship to mankind.

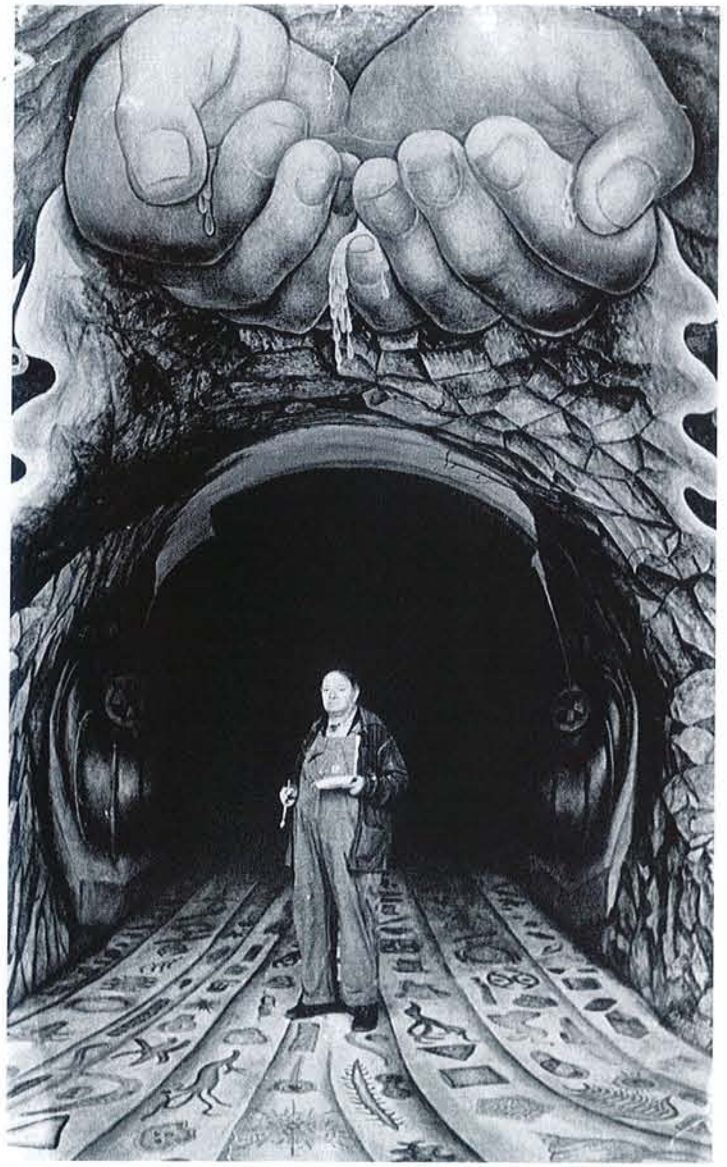
Painted inside the Rio Lerma water distribution plant, Rivera's mural cycle covered the walls, floor and tunnel of the cistern basin. In this unique cycle, Rivera divided his thematic conception into stages. The first was the evolution from mineral elements and the first cells to the beginning of life. This is followed by a vision in which water workers offer the vital fluid to the different social classes of Mexican society, and succeeded by scenes of the directors and technicians who participated in the construction of the plant. At the very heart of the composition, located above the tunnel entrance, Rivera placed a giant pair of worker's hands, offering water, the symbolic gift of Tlaloc, the rain god, to the city. Outside, he created a giant mosaic earth sculpture of the rain god to symbolize the link between the creation and distribution of water and Mexico's pre-Columbian past.

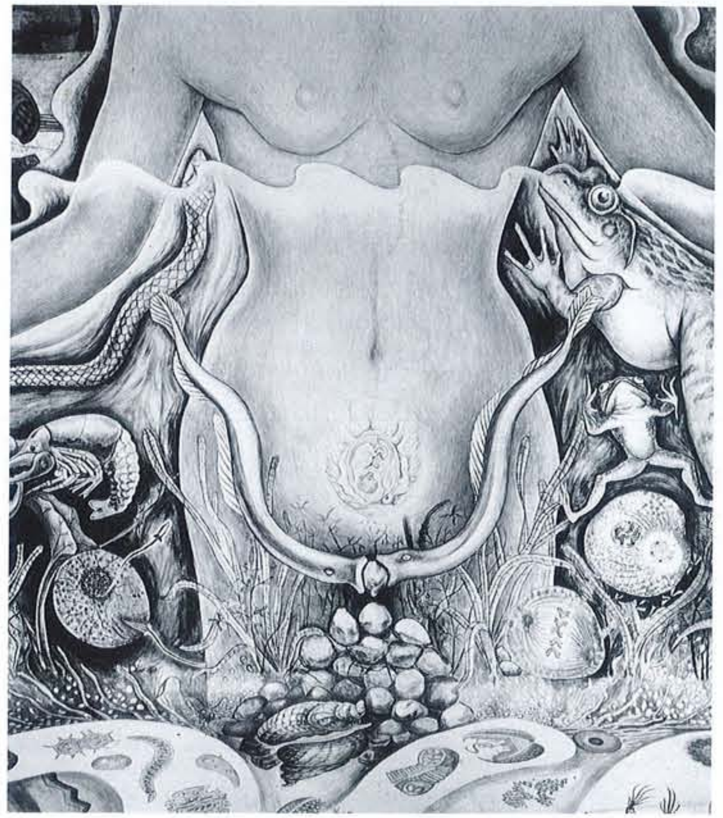
When Rivera began this mural he considered it a unique opportunity, particularly since the building was envisaged as a cultural and educational entity as well as a water distribution plant. He intended to create a unity in the work which would link the exterior to the interior, organically combining modernity with the country's pre-Columbian past, and linking the origins of life with the water of the earth. However, the mural also carried a deliberately political message, so characteristic of Rivera's public works. During the building of the water distribution plant, thirty-five workmen had been killed and the completed mural is as much a monument to these workers as it is an evocation of the origins of life.

193 *opposite*
Diego Rivera: *Rio Lerma*. Fresco, 1951. Rio Lerma Waterworks, Mexico City.

194
Diego Rivera posing with the Rio Lerma Waterworks mural.

195
Diego Rivera: *Rio Lerma*. Fresco, 1951. Rio Lerma Waterworks, Mexico City.





the evidence of the modern world, but also the key to a new society. Yet the paradox inherent in the murals that Rivera created from 1940 until his death in 1957 is an apparent rejection of this thesis. Indeed, many of his later murals seem to be firmly anchored in the past as a reminder of the intellectual and cultural roots from which the Mexican people have sprung, but from which their new Mexican society seemed increasingly to distance itself.