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José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization – Modern Human Sacrifice* (detail). Fresco, 1932. Post-Cortesian section, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

FOUR

RIVERA AND OROZCO IN THE 1930s

RE-ENVISIONING NATIONHOOD

'The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psychoeffective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native. . . . colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. By a kind of perverted logic it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.'

Frantz Fanon: *The Wretched of the Earth*

Mexican muralism in the 1920s was characterized by attempts to create an image of the people as they emerged from the turmoil of the revolution. Metaphysical beginnings had been superseded by the realities of populist experiences and concerns, which formed the dominant imagery in the murals of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros by the mid-1920s.

By the end of that decade, the national cultural focus began to shift from the local and immediate concerns of the revolution towards an interrogation of the national past, a redefining of the nation's identity in the aftermath of its independence and national revolution. The re-envisioning of the country's sense of itself through a vision of its epic historical experience formed the basis for the visual exploration of Mexican national identity. Simultaneously, the industrialized and technological modernity of the nearby United States of America was in turn used by the painters to confront and question the contemporary world beyond Mexico. Mexico and the United States were the arenas in which all three painters found themselves during the 1930s, and both countries provided stimuli for the creation of some of their most significant works.

The political dynamics governing the formation of the new nation state at the end of the 1920s led to a reassessment of Mexico's history throughout the following decade. The ideological discourse underlying this process, which pre-dated the revolution, formed the basis for a fresh national and cultural identity for Mexico.

In 1925, after stepping down as Minister of Education, Vasconcelos published a book entitled *La Raza Cósmica* (The Cosmic Race). In it, he argued that the *mestizo* represented the true essence of Mexican nationality. He went on to argue that because of their fusion of pre-Columbian and European ancestry, the *mestizos* would become the chosen race of the future, the fifth great race of humanity, a final synthesis distilled from all the great races that had gone before them.[1] By putting forward such theories on the nature of Mexican identity, Vasconcelos and his theoretical predecessors helped to legitimize the political and ideological framework within which the *mestizo* was seen as embodying national consciousness.

The dynamics of political power in Mexico at the end of the 1920s were such that the contending forces of the revolution were beginning to coalesce. Political authority and power

became centralized in the form of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, which began to rule and organize on a national scale.[2] For many Mexicans, the creation of the PRI, as it is known, coincided with the point at which it became possible to view their nation not so much as a simple geographical context in which revolutionary struggle and bloodshed seemed the only reality, but as a country with a past, a present and a future.

For all factions within the Mexican state at the time, the acknowledgment of this comprised the basis on which a defence of the country against the disruptive incursions of modern imperialism could be forged and a definition of nationhood created. The defence of nationhood was highly significant for the radical left, as they saw it as a protection of what they considered to be one of the central planks of the 1910 National Democratic Revolution. For the others who had forged the new state after the revolution – the *mestizo* middle class, the *rancheros* and the remnants of the old pre-revolutionary élites – such a defence was necessary in order to protect the base on which they could consolidate their own political and financial interests within a highly centralized state, free from the interference of external influences such as the United States.

During the 1930s, against the backdrop of this political dynamic, Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco created a series of epic mural cycles on the theme of Mexican history. The central characteristic of these cycles is not a simplistic nationalist promotion of a preconceived Mexican national identity, but a re-appropriation and reassembly of the nation's past into a usable history. The public discourse of these epic cycles provided the opportunity to explore and promote the layers of different national meaning derived from a past fashioned out of the domination and absorption of an indigenous peoples and their culture by Europeans. Such meanings were often conflicting and contradictory, expressed in ways both utopian and tragic. Nevertheless, the visual image of a modern Mexican cultural identity emerged for the first time in these murals.

Two of the four mural cycles created during the 1930s dealing with the epic of Mexican history were painted by Rivera and two by Orozco. Rivera's involvement with his two great cycles on the history of Mexico began in 1929. Following the completion of his frescoes in the Ministry of Education, he was commissioned first by the Mexican government to paint a history of Mexico on the main stairway of the National Palace, and then by the American Ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow, to paint a mural on a similar theme in the Cortez Palace in Cuernavaca.[3]

The highly prestigious locations of both these commissions, one in the seat of national government, and the other in the very building that Cortez had built for himself following the defeat of Cuernavaca, signalled the real beginnings of the institutionalization of the Mexican mural movement. Throughout the 1920s, many murals, particularly those of Rivera, had been imbued with the pictorial rhetoric of leftist politics. Indeed, Rivera's particular achievement during those years had been to create a visual image of a revolutionary and popular culture, which previously had existed in Mexico only in the realm of memory or in the broadsheets, *ex-voto* church paintings or working men's *pulqueria* drinking houses. Rivera had carefully crafted a popular vocabulary of social images and themes drawn from these sources to appeal to a public that extended beyond the confines of the country's bourgeoisie, with its narrowly exclusive literary culture. As a result, he managed to create a foundation on which to convey to this much wider audience the sense of continuity with a forgotten past and a feeling of participation in a historical process that had been largely ignored in the history of the country's colonial experience.

By the end of the decade, the political nationalists who dominated the Mexican state in the newly constituted ruling party began to sense in the public murals of Rivera a means of substantiating culturally their own role in Mexico's revolutionary development. Murals commissioned or encouraged by the state and its institutions could reflect an interpretation of Mexican history in which their own role could be made to appear highly significant. The ground was thus laid for the development of an officially sanctioned nationalist vision of Mexico's rebirth from the tragic consequences of its past.

Nowhere was the dual process of cultural institutionalization and emergent national identity more keenly articulated than in Rivera's mural *The History of Mexico*, begun in 1929. Commissioned by the central government, at a time when Rivera's reputation in Mexico as well as abroad was reaching its peak, the fresco was also the first of the murals to place the Mexican

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Diego Rivera: *The History of Mexico.* Fresco, 1929–35. National Palace, Mexico City.

revolution within some kind of historical perspective. In so doing, it presented for the first time a history that could in some senses be recognized from within a framework of shared national experiences and values. In particular, it set out to present judgments on past events in national history.

The mural was monumental in scale and painted on three adjoining walls in the National Palace, overlooking the imposing colonial building's main staircase.[4] Rivera subdivided the overall theme in relation to the architectural disposition of the walls. The largest of the three walls, the central one, displays the part of Mexican history that Rivera regarded as more widely and objectively known, namely the period from the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1519 until up to and including the revolution. On the two adjoining walls, Rivera painted other periods of Mexican history. On the right, he depicted the pre-Columbian world, while on the left he painted a panorama of modern-day Mexico as he saw it. Physically, the two side walls act as thematic prologue and epilogue to the main historical drama of the dominating centre wall.

Rivera's utopian social vision is evident on the right-hand wall, depicting the world of pre-Columbian Mexico. The legendary god-king of the pre-Hispanic world, Quetzalcoatl, creator of culture, civilization and learning, sits serenely amidst his subjects.[5] Images of crop cultivation and the carving of stone sculptures surround him, symbolizing indigenous culture and civilization. Rivera also included another view of this indigenous world, one characterized by conflict and slavery: the human sacrifice to the gods. An Aztec priest is seen brandishing an obsidian dagger, while in another area Indians are locked into the combat of inter-tribal conflict. Yet Rivera's depiction of this unattractive face of the pre-Columbian world is strangely mute. Rivera expressed the legendary myth and superstition that permeated this civilization and which contributed to its downfall only in incarnations of Quetzalcoatl, in forms other than his human one.[6] In the upper background he appears as a feathered serpent rising out of a volcano in tongues of flames, while to the right he appears riding the serpent boat in which he left the Indian world, expelled by the very Indians to whom he had brought civilization and learning. In Rivera's hands, pre-Columbian myth and superstition form a strange world in which culture and conflict, agriculture and slavery are treated with equal importance, assuming no rank or hierarchy. Unlike Orozco, Rivera chose to suspend all sense of judgment in the face of such a reality. The ethics of a European culture, brutally imposed on this ancient world by the Spanish, cannot seemingly be applied to or be part of this existence, so unrelated was it to the make-up and social values of the European culture that usurped it. Rivera instead chose to present the components of a reality unhindered by the trappings of contemporary moral or political assertion. It is a golden age. Only a hint of its demise, resulting from overburdening superstition, internal dissension and disintegration, is expressed.[7] When the disintegration and

90
Diego Rivera: *The History of Mexico – The Ancient Indian World*. Fresco, 1929–35. North wall, National Palace, Mexico City.

91
Diego Rivera: *The History of Mexico*. Fresco, 1929–35. West wall, detail of central arch, National Palace, Mexico City.

subjugation eventually arrives, conversely it is seen as being imposed, both metaphorically and literally, from outside. For, against the evidence of history, the disintegration of the Indian world is shown, in the adjacent central wall, as being exclusively the result of the Spanish conquest.[8]

The history configured by Rivera on the central wall is a two-dimensional one, shorn of many of the complexities of the historical transformation of Mexico after the demise of the pre-Columbian world. Rivera starkly rendered the positive and negative aspects of his nation's history. He reduced the past to actions that conformed a heroic history and others that comprised one of betrayal and oppression. The images are cast as invitations to the spectator to pass judgment upon events in Mexican history. Rivera depicted the good and the heroic as synonymous with the defence of Mexico from exterior violation; by contrast, the bad is unmistakably associated with invasion, subjugation and exploitation.

The compositional structure through which Rivera conveyed his complex narratives is the key to the mural's meaning. The ideological premise of the centre wall is that Mexican national revolutionary history arises out of the conquest. The surrounding narratives either mirror or resist the legacy of this foundation. The conquest is depicted centrally in the lower section of the mural, Rivera using the position of the image within the composition to reflect the role he had assigned to it in national history.

The images depicted on the central wall stretch across the whole of its length. The wall is crowned by five arches. Rivera placed a complex of figures identified with the centuries of struggle and resistance to colonial subjugation and dictatorship in an ascending chronology directly under the central arch. The placement of these symbols of resistance ensures their reading as the central core of Rivera's historical interpretation. At the very centre of the mural lies the Aztec symbol of an eagle with a serpent in its mouth. This is Rivera's symbolic national heart.

The chronology assembled in this central area begins at the bottom with the image of the Aztec prince Cuauhtemoc in combat with Cortez the conquistador.[9] This passage synthesizes the twin concepts of resistance and the heroic. Cuauhtemoc's

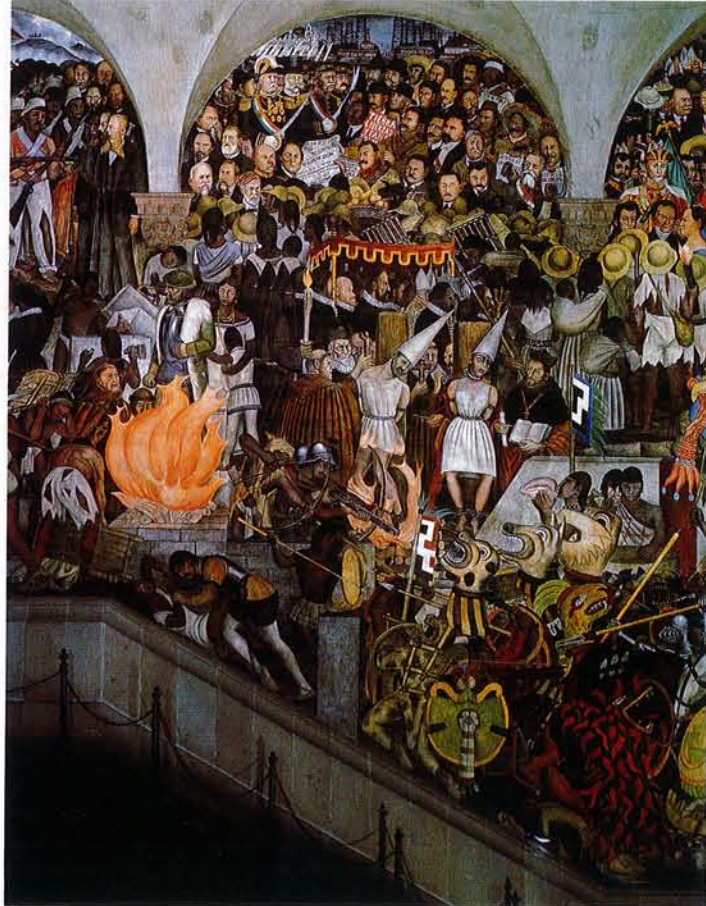
battle with Cortez and the invading conquistadors represents the first struggle against the outsider. The Aztec's portrayal also symbolizes disbelief in the myths and superstitions that mistakenly led Aztec priests to believe that Cortez represented the returning incarnation of their god Quetzalcoatl, a belief that in no small way facilitated the conquest of the Aztec kingdom.[10]

In the sequences above, Rivera isolated other significant moments of resistance and heroism in the prominent images of the priests Hidalgo and Morelos, the father figures of Mexican independence in the nineteenth century.[11] Above them, at the apex of the central arch and acting as a thematic and ideological 'crown' to the whole cycle are Obregón and Calles, the political leaders of the revolution and its aftermath. Carrillo Puerto, the

92
Diego Rivera: *The History of Mexico.* Fresco, 1929–35. West wall, left inner arch, National Palace, Mexico City.

93 *below*
Diego Rivera: *The History of Mexico.* Fresco, 1929–35. West wall, right inner arch, National Palace, Mexico City.

94 *opposite*
Diego Rivera: *The History of Mexico.* Fresco, 1929–35. West wall, detail of right inner arch, National Palace, Mexico City.



Indian socialist governor of Yucatán, Francisco Villa and Luis Cabrera, the assassinated communist agrarian leader, are also portrayed, standing behind the famous standard of the revolution, with its words of *Tierra y Libertad* (land and freedom) symbolizing the spirit of the agrarian revolt of the peasantry.

The secondary vertical tiers of the composition are located under the two arches on either side of the centre, and contain scenes representing the positive and negative aspects of the great political struggles of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the right, the period of *La Reforma* is represented with the prominent display of Benito Juárez, Mexico's first Indian president, whose liberally democratic regime foreshadowed many of the policies and aims of the 1910 revolution. In contrast, the regime of Porfirio Díaz is shown under the arch to the left of the centre. Protagonists to the confrontation of Díaz, figures such as Zapata, Otilio Montaño, Carranza, Vasconcelos and others, are set against a backdrop at the top of the arch containing imagery of oil drilling rigs. The rigs form an ambivalent setting, symbolizing the modernity that Porfirio Díaz sought during his dictatorship, the annexation of that modernity by foreign powers against which in part the revolution fought, and the idea of the modern epoch, which the revolution itself heralded. Careful scrutiny of these two areas of the mural reveals an important continuity of the positive and negative theme. Moving upwards through the tiers of the right inner arch, Rivera intended a link to be drawn between the arrival of the

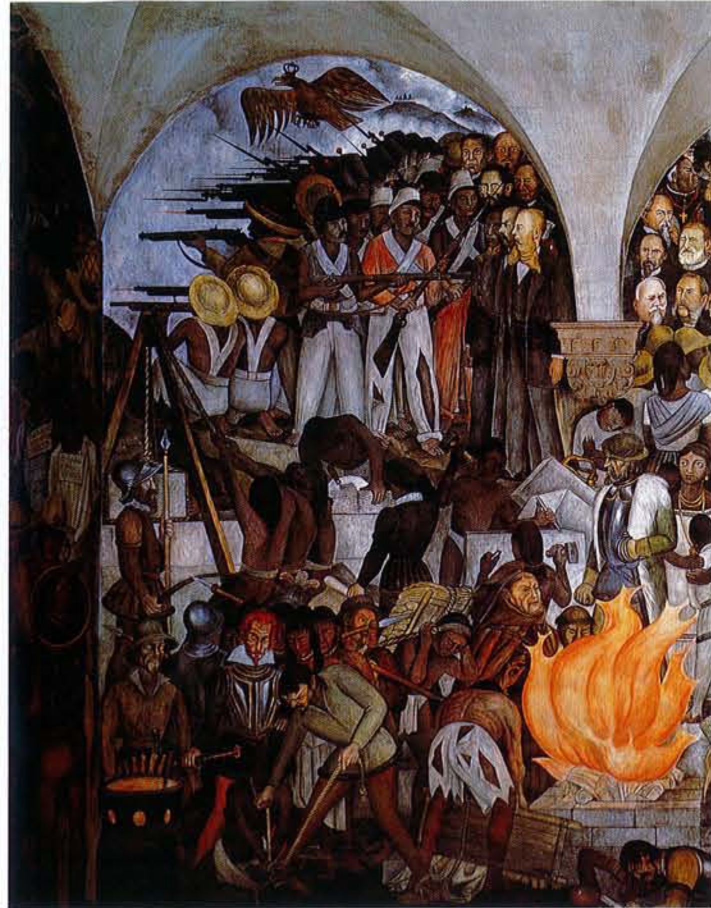
CONSTITUCION
DE 1857
LEYES DE
REFORMA

PIERSON &
PIERCE OIL Co. LONDON
STANDARD OIL Co. N.Y.
GRAN CIA AZUCARERA
TIERRA
LIBERTAD
Y PAN
PLAN DE Sn LUIS
1905
"REGENERACION"
REVOLUCION SOCIAL
1908
1906-1907
PLAN DE AYALA
ARTICULO 27
1917
123
LEY DEL 6
DE ENERO

95 *opposite*
Diego Rivera: *The History of Mexico.* Fresco, 1929–35. West wall, detail of left inner arch, National Palace, Mexico City.

96
Diego Rivera: *The History of Mexico.* Fresco, 1929–35. West wall, left outer arch, National Palace, Mexico City.

97
Diego Rivera: *The History of Mexico.* Fresco, 1929–35. West wall, right outer arch, National Palace, Mexico City.



Franciscans during the conquest and the inheritance of their influence in the guise of the liberal Benito Juárez. Likewise, under the left inner arch, the equation between the conquest, the spiritual terror of the inquisition and the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz is unmistakable.

Much of the intended reading of the narratives in the mural is determined by what Rivera chose to portray along the bottom and outer edges of the wall. Here he depicted the invasions and violations experienced by Mexico from the conquest to the revolution. The image of the conquest runs from right to left in a vast assemblage of interlocking scenes along the entire length of the lower section of the wall, symbolizing the political and social foundations from which arises the modern Mexican history depicted above. In these images, Rivera expresses the conquest not merely as an armed incursion, but as a process of total cultural, physical and spiritual subjugation and transformation. The introduction of Catholicism depicted on the right-hand side transforms the superstitious spirituality of the Indians and their nature gods, while on the left, the cruel arm of this religious conversion is pictured in images of the Spanish Inquisition, juxtaposed with images of the branding and slavery of Indians.

Rivera continued the theme of external violation under the outer arches of both the right- and left-hand sides of the central wall. Scenes of foreign domination and invasion are pictured. On the right, the Mexican-American war of 1847, during which Mexico was occupied by the United States, is shown, while on

the left the French occupation of Mexico in 1861 and the rule of the puppet Austrian emperor Maximilian are portrayed.[12]

Together with the images of the conquest, these outer flanking scenes precondition the idea of the heroic tradition of resistance portrayed at the core of the mural. Rivera shows the struggle taking place in a country whose people have been totally and irrevocably transformed by three centuries of colonial rule. His epic configuration of Mexican national history is thus primarily about the heroic struggle to rid the nation of the shackles of colonial legacy. In the aftermath of the revolution, these struggles became the catalyst for the spiritual endeavour to 'excavate' parts of the pre-colonial and indigenous roots from which the new nation was derived.

As with much history painting, Rivera's mural renders into the realm of myth every event and every personage connected to the nation's history. He promulgated the idea of the hero, a noble and untarnished being, in whose name politics are created, causes followed and around whom history is configured into meaningful constructions. Like all heroic constructions of history, the reality often conspires to disrupt the heroic expression, stripping it of its lustre. In Rivera's hands, the heroic conclusion to this massive central panel is negated by the realities of the revolution and its aftermath. The political context in which Rivera painted this mural was one characterized by greed, corruption and oppression. The influence of the former Mexican leader, Plutarco Calles, on Mexican political life had transformed

98 *opposite*
Diego Rivera: *The History of Mexico – The World of Today and Tomorrow.* Fresco, 1929–35. South wall, National Palace, Mexico City.

99
Diego Rivera painting the west wall of *The History of Mexico – Mexico Today and Tomorrow*, 1935.

the radical and heady days of the early 1920s into a regime of power-seeking corruption. Rivera's configuration of a heroic national ancestry thus provided a convenient contemporary mythology which Mexican leaders then and now were and are able to claim as their inheritance. However, in the concluding left-hand panel, painted by Rivera in 1935 following his return from the United States, he portrayed the absorption of the Mexican working classes into Mexican history by including the image of Karl Marx and the Communist and Workers' Movement. The mythology of the mural is continued in this panel. By picturing the revolutionary struggles of the workers' movements together with the portrait of Karl Marx, Rivera presents contemporary political struggles as part of the national heritage.

Rivera's portrayal of Marx sustains itself by suggesting the communist ideal as the final act in this national struggle, concluding the historical transformation of Mexico. But just as he had done with his portrayal of Quetzalcoatl on the opposite wall, here too Rivera was forced to depict Marx and the world he proclaimed as a golden age to which Mexico would return, mirroring Quetzalcoatl's idyllic world. As with the great Aztec kingdom, the Marxist domain lay beyond any real experience to which Rivera could be a witness. He could therefore do nothing but paint it as a utopia.

Rivera's creation of a visual mythology of post-revolutionary Mexican nationalist politics remains his most questionable, as well as his most significant, cultural contribution. More than any other of the great public murals in Mexico, the National Palace mural represents a synthesis of Mexican nationalist politics and the post-colonial cultural renaissance that sustained them ideologically. It is a work that echoes the thrust of nationalist assertions and definition based on the concept of the *mestizo*, and has become the artistic reflection of what Rodríguez has described as the birth of 'a new society, later to become the Mestizo of our times'.[13]

Rivera's other mural on Mexican history, commissioned by the American Ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow, for the Cortez Palace in Cuernavaca was begun shortly after he had started work on the cycle in the National Palace. The acceptance of this commission, like that of the other, was steeped in controversy and political irony. In 1928 Morrow, the American capitalist, had persuaded the Mexican president, Plutarco Calles, to amend informally legislation affecting Mexican oil rights to favour the interests of American investors. He was now commissioning the world's most celebrated Marxist painter of nationalist, anti-imperialist murals.[14] However, the commissioning of the Cuernavaca mural was part of an exercise in American diplomacy: Morrow had recently taken up residence in the town of Cuernavaca, and the commission was a gesture of good will.[15]

Rivera's mural at Cuernavaca was considerably smaller than the one at the National Palace. Painted along three walls of an open corridor on the second floor of the palace, the chosen theme was *The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos*. Unlike the work at the National Palace, Rivera constructed his composition by

100
Diego Rivera: *The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos*. General view along the corridor site in the Cortez Palace, Cuernavaca, Mexico.

102
Diego Rivera: *The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos – Crossing the Barranca*. Fresco, 1929–30. Detail, Cortez Palace, Cuernavaca, Mexico.

101
Diego Rivera: *The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos*. Fresco, 1929–30. Detail, Cortez Palace, Cuernavaca, Mexico.

means of a linear, horizontal sequence of images running from right to left. Using the story of Cuernavaca as a metaphor for the conquest of Mexico, Rivera portrayed the history of Mexico in a chronological sequence. The different divisions within the linear composition were dictated by the presence of arched niches interrupting the length of flat wall surfaces on which Rivera painted his fresco, and which he used to segment the narrative into sequences. The narrative begins on the right, around the entrance to the passageway. Rivera arranged the combatants at either side of the arched doorway. On the right, Spanish knights fire their guns at their Indian adversaries, who are pictured on both sides of the doorway. Rivera included the figure of Cuauhtemoc, portrayed in the same pose as at the National Palace. Above the doorway, Rivera depicted an Aztec pyramid temple, on the summit of which a human sacrifice is being performed, a gesture to the brutal realities of that time which he chose not to include in the National Palace mural. This section of the mural, which extends on to the long main wall, is one of the finest passages of painting in Rivera's murals. Its most striking quality is the extraordinary exuberance of colour, which highlights not only the decorative quality of the exotic clothing of the Aztec warriors, but also the icy grey-blue of the Spanish conquistadors' steel armour, emphasizing the technical dominance in warfare of Spanish invaders over their Indian adversaries. This contrast is vividly expressed in the large image of a Spanish knight on a white horse brandishing his sword at an Aztec warrior, who fights back with a barbed wooden club. The battle dress of the combatants covers their whole body, but whereas the mounted Spaniard is dressed entirely in steel, the Indian fights unshod and on foot; he wears a plumed pink costume with a birdhead mask. The exoticism of the Indian confronts the technologically superior European in a struggle between two very different cultures.

A striking feature of this first part of the fresco is the way in which Rivera uses pictorial sources and references to underscore the extent of cultural absorption that the act of conquest represented. His skilful incorporation of the influence of Italian renaissance compositional form represents an eloquent aesthetic metaphor for the conquest of Indian America by European renaissance man.[16]

From the opening sequence, the narrative of the images moves leftwards along the main corridor walls. Initially, the scenes refer directly to the taking of the town and lands of Cuernavaca by the Spanish. This is followed by images depicting the construction of the Cortez Palace by the defeated Indians. From here, the narrative develops into a picture of the Indians as labourers and sugarcane cutters for the colonial state of Morelos. These three sequences give way to portrayals of the spiritual conversion of the Indian by the Catholic priests at the end of the cycle. The Catholic crusade to convert the Indians is seen as both gentle and forgiving, and cruel and despotic. Mirroring the Aztec sacrifice depicted in the opening sequences of the work, above the doorway at the end of the cycle Rivera portrayed the burning of heretics during the Spanish Inquisition, as well as the hanging and horsewhipping of Indians by their Spanish masters. The images represent the exchange of one culture's cruelty for that of another, but the final, imposing image of Zapata, accompanied by his white horse, symbolizes liberation from the colonial shackles of conquest, from landlordism and the restrictions of an imposed faith.

Running along the length of the Cuernavaca mural is a frieze-like grisaille. Like the great frescoes of the Italian renaissance, this grisaille contains monochromatic narrative imagery paralleling the theme above it, and is another example of Rivera's use of historical sources. Apart from the obvious reference of the grisaille to Italian renaissance painting, Rivera used the device as a support for his exhaustive study of the Sahagún Codex.[17] The Codex seems to have influenced Rivera to produce a faithful record of events and costumes of the time. The stylization of the Codex illustrations is visible not only in the grisaille panels, but also in some of the painted sequences in the main body of the fresco. The sequential and episodic treatment of this fresco underlines the influence of this source, and Rivera's attempt to narrate the story of Mexican history in these terms contrasts strongly with the overlapping narratives of the National Palace mural.

103 *previous pages*
Diego Rivera: *The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos – The Enslavement of the Indian* and *Constructing the Cortez Palace*. Fresco, 1929–30. Detail, Cortez Palace, Cuernavaca, Mexico.

104 *opposite*
Diego Rivera: *The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos – The Conversion of the Indian*. Fresco, 1929–30. Detail, Cortez Palace, Cuernavaca, Mexico.

105 *below*
José Clemente Orozco: *Revolution and Universal Brotherhood – Ghandi, Imperialism and Slavery*. 1931. New School for Social Research, New York.

106 *bottom*
José Clemente Orozco: *Revolution and Universal Brotherhood – Socialism (Yucatan), Socialism (Lenin)*. 1931. New School for Social Research, New York.

Despite its references to the harshness of the pre-Columbian world, the murals of this period at Cuernavaca and the National Palace largely idealize that world and its culture. Rivera's idealization is, of course, deliberate, contrasting starkly with the world he has portrayed of the European colonialists, in order to suggest a concept of Mexican national integrity. This is rooted in the idea of resistance, against the violation of the country both by outsiders, and by dictators from within. Rivera therefore places emphasis on the Indian past and the Indian in general as being the true representative of that identity. For Rivera, the pre-Columbian past represents a time in Mexican history when the nation was able to determine its direction free from outside domination. In Rivera's hands, the indigenous world thus becomes a powerful nationalist symbol.

The conceptual and historical paradigms provided by Rivera were very different from those painted by Orozco in the 1930s. Like Rivera, Orozco also became engaged during this period with confronting and interrogating the epic of history. The mural cycles that he painted on the history of America at Dartmouth College in the United States and of Mexican history at the Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara remain among his greatest achievements.

For Orozco, the struggles and events of history were all part of a single conflict in which the possibilities of progress vie with the pressing forces of reaction, greed, power and corruption in a never-ending circular sequence, in which no single construction or narrative can be dominant. Orozco was thus profoundly opposed to the mythologizing and utopian constructions of national history that were so characteristic of Rivera's murals.

Orozco's first engagement with the historical epic was undertaken not in Mexico but in the United States, at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Orozco arrived at Dartmouth College on 2 May 1932. His presence at the prestigious east-coast university was the result of a prolonged effort by both faculty and administration to bring him there. The efforts of the Rockefeller family, whose son Nelson was studying at Dartmouth in 1930, had been especially influential.[18] Orozco had been in the United States since 1927, where he went because 'there was little to hold me in Mexico in 1927 and I resolved to go to New York'.[19] Since then, with the support of Alma Reed, whose cultural and literary salon, the Ashram, he had joined, he had continued working, exhibiting his celebrated series of gouache, pen and ink drawings on the theme of Mexico in revolution, and producing a number of important easel paintings.[20]

In 1930 he travelled west to Pomona College in Claremont, California, where he created his first murals in the United States. Here, at the south end of the college's refectory, Orozco painted *Prometheus*, in which the theme, composition and colour anticipated the expressive texture of his murals in Guadalajara, which he would paint in the latter half of the decade. Later that year, Orozco returned to New York where he carried out another group of murals, this time in the New School for Social Research on the theme of *Revolution and Universal Brotherhood*, an allegory of ideal human social orders.

107
José Clemente Orozco: *Prometheus*.
Fresco, 1930. Pomona College, Claremont, California.

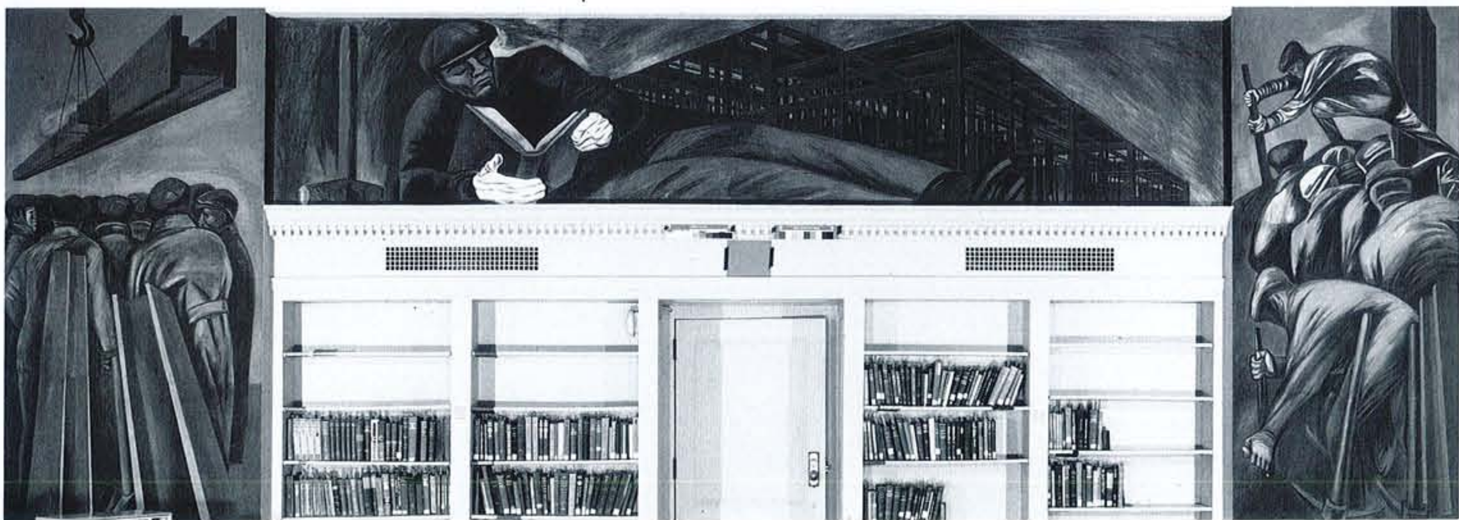
108
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization – Ancient Human Sacrifice*.
Fresco, 1932. Detail, pre-Cortesian section, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

Orozco's Dartmouth mural was an enormous undertaking. Measuring 150 feet in length, it was painted in the reserve room of the Baker Library. Orozco had been particularly struck by the location on a previous visit to the college. 'These are the walls for my best mural, my epic of America', he had commented when he saw them for the first time.[21] The fresco cycle that he painted there was not strictly speaking a history of Mexico. Rather, as implied by his statement, Orozco wished to confront not a specifically national history so much as a North American one. As Laurence Hurlbert noted, Orozco's intention was to 'paint his conception of the development and current state of civilization in *America, the "New World"*.'[22]

Although described by Orozco as one of the best examples of liberalism in the north, Dartmouth College was in fact a bastion of white Anglo-Saxon educational privilege. Yet the college had had very different beginnings and intentions, and was founded in the late eighteenth century specifically for the purpose of providing education for the North American Indian. The indigenous ancestry of the college in part anticipated Orozco's approach to the thematic concept of his mural. Ernest Hopkins, the University President, made note of Orozco's comment that 'the resolution of your college is in line with its traditions that connect it with the Indian races of America.'[23] The mural was thus conceived not as a historical narrative in a simple sequential sense,

109
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization*. Fresco, 1932. Overview, pre-Cortesian section, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

110
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization*. Fresco, 1932. Overview, post-Cortesian section, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.



111
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization – Modern Industrial Man*. Fresco, 1932. Detail, post-Cortesian section, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

112
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization – The Arrival of Quetzalcoatl*. Fresco, 1932. Detail, pre-Cortesian section, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

but as the conceptualization of a historical idea. In this case it was an idea concerning America, a continent characterized by the dualities of Indian and European historical experience. As Orozco wrote

> In every painting, as in any other work, there is always an *idea, never a story*. . . . The important point regarding the frescos of Baker Library is not only the quality of the idea that initiates and organizes the whole structure, it is also the fact that it is an American idea developed into American forms, American feeling, and as a consequence into an American style.[24]

Orozco's concept centred on what he termed the 'living myth' of Quetzalcoatl, which, as Laurence Hurlbert has described, was fundamental to Orozco's 'depiction of the indigenous civilizations and their relationship to European culture transported to this continent in the early sixteenth century'.[25] For Orozco, the myth of Quetzalcoatl was the basis of his grand ideological vision of the American idea, in which he believed that

> The America continental races are now becoming aware of their own personality as it merges from two cultural currents, the indigenous and the European. The great American myth of Quetzalcoatl is a living one, embracing both elements and pointing clearly by its prophetic nature, to the responsibility shared equally by the two Americas of creating here an authentic American civilization.[26]

Orozco's visualization at Dartmouth of this idea of America was conceived in two main parts. He painted the first part, representing the period of America's pre-Columbian civilization, along the western section of the long wall in the library's reserve room. He painted post-Cortez America along the other half of the wall, starting with the conquest and ending with a portrayal of contemporary America formed by the constituent parts of its Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon experience.

Unlike Rivera, Orozco did not conceive this historical visualization as a rhetorical call of nationalist or continentalist liberation and identity. Rather, he saw the idea of the American experience not only as a duality, but also as a base on to which he could map the important question of humanity's endless struggle to realize its greatest aspirations and ideals and its simultaneous frustration by its innate fallibility. For Orozco, this dichotomy of the human character was tragically repetitive and could not be

conveniently located within specific geographical areas, historical times, races and cultures. The duality of the American experience, with the intrusion and subjugation of one people's culture by another, was thus the perfect ground on which to reveal such divisions.

Orozco's mural at Dartmouth is therefore a thematic layering of meanings and narratives. The dual nature of the continent's histories, made up of indigenous and European ancestries, is conceived as a grand sequence of an indigenous world and its culture being superseded and transformed by the intrusion of another. Beneath this grand sequence is a distinctly circular or revolving history, in which events are seen merely as different backdrops against which Orozco expressed the dilemma of the human ideal thwarted by human fallibility.

He began his cycle on the west wall with the dawn of American history in his panels of *Ancient Migration* and *Ancient Human Sacrifice*.[27] The latter, depicting the ritual sacrifice of an enemy warrior to Huitzilopochtli announces the advent of Aztec civilization, in which Orozco saw death as one of the central components of culture.[28] At the beginning of the library's long central north wall, Orozco painted the first of three interconnecting images depicting the age of Quetzalcoatl. The sequence begins with *Aztec Warriors* and ends with the image of Spanish knights dressed in armour. The age of Quetzalcoatl is pictured in three parts. The first, *The Arrival of Quetzalcoatl* depicts the Aztec

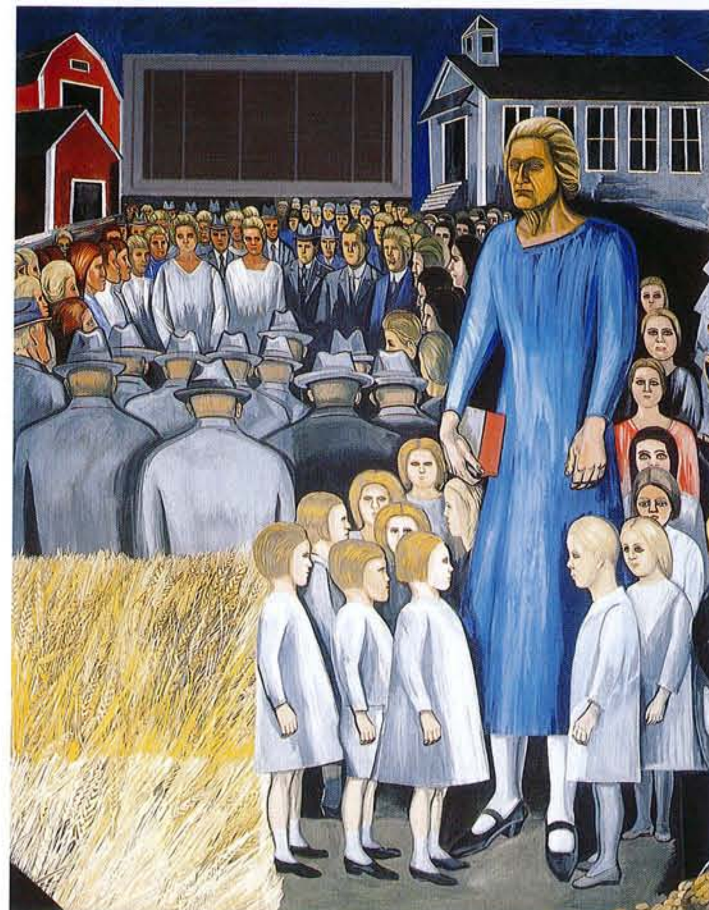
113
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization – The Departure of Quetzalcoatl.* Fresco, 1932. Detail, pre-Cortesian section, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

114
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization – The Prophecy.* Fresco, 1932. Detail, pre-Cortesian section, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

god commanding the Indian world to set aside greed, superstition, magic ritual and militarism in favour of civilization, where learning and culture triumph over barbarity and darkness. Orozco's use of colour in these passages is transformed from sombre greys and browns to strident blues and yellows. Images of the great pyramids, the cultivation of maize, stone carving and science speak of the great achievements of the Toltec and Mayan civilizations. These positive images unfold towards the centre of the long central wall with Orozco's insistent theme of the endless struggle caused by the duality of human nature revealing itself in the return of barbarity, cruelty and superstition. Quetzalcoatl is expelled by evil sorcerers from his kingdom on a raft of serpents, with the triumph of darkness and the fall of the nation that has rejected his teachings prophesied by his departure.[29] Quetzalcoatl's prophecy of doom, demise and return is announced as a new age, that of the advent of the white man, the enslavement of the Indian and the epoch of Spanish colonialism.

Unlike some of the images that he would paint in his great historical cycle a few years later in Guadalajara, Orozco depicts the arrival of Spanish colonialism with the utmost pessimism. Cortez's arrival on the shores of Mexico is presented as a kind of punishment for the Aztec world's rejection of Quetzalcoatl, a turning away from the achievements of their golden age of civilization. Cortez is seen as an enslaver, whose presence ushers in an epoch characterized not by the great achievements of

115
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization – Cortez and the Cross.* Fresco, 1932. Detail, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.



116
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization – Anglo-America.* Fresco, 1932. Detail, post-Cortesian section. Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

117 *opposite*
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization – Latin America.* Fresco, 1932. Detail, post-Cortesian section, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

European art and culture but by a technological superiority that brings with it a mechanical underworld. It is a world dominated by giant pieces of machinery in which human presence and spirit are conspicuous by their absence.

From this frightening world, Orozco moves on to his celebrated panels depicting modern America. The first, *Anglo-America*, is a world of conformity. Children stand obediently around their strait-laced teacher, while behind them a mass of adults gather at a town-hall meeting. The expressive sameness of their features speaks tellingly of a democratic political process (despite it being in part greatly admired by Orozco) transformed into a rigid conformity and agreement, in which polite orderliness eschews all sense of questioning. By contrast, *Hispanic America* or *Latin America* is a world scarred by corruption, greed and chaos. Its background is a mesh of fallen and destroyed buildings, reminiscent of Orozco's earlier National Preparatory School panel, *Destruction of the Old Order*. Corrupt politicians and generals hoard money. At the centre, however, stands the Latin American rebel, Emiliano Zapata. Zapata is portrayed as the personification of Latin American idealism. As Orozco himself said about this image,

> The best representation of Hispanic-American idealism, not as an abstract idea but as an accomplished fact would be, I think, the figure of a rebel. After the destruction of the armed revolution (whether against a foreign aggressor or local exploiter or dictator) there remains a triumphant ideal with the chance of realization. If there is any need for

118
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization – The Gods of the Modern World.* Fresco, 1932. Detail, post-Cortesian section, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

expressing in just one sentence the highest ideal of the Hispanic-American hero, it would be as follows: 'justice whatever the cost'.[30]

However, Orozco depicts Zapata as being stabbed in the back by a North American general. The general is pictured with a motley crew of accomplices – businessmen, foreign armies and, even more tellingly, a collection of Zapata's own countrymen. Such people are viewed by Orozco as loathsome demons, whose lack of principles is equalled only by their greed.

Education is the subject of the following sequence, the last of the compositions on the long central north wall. In his panel of *The Gods of the Modern World*, Orozco created one of his most powerful images. Unlike the panel depicting the American teacher, where learning is expressed as attention and obedience, *Gods of the Modern World* pictures education as a nightmare of futile learning and sterile knowledge. These purveyors of false knowledge, portrayed by Orozco as skeletons dressed in

119
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization – Modern Human Sacrifice.* Fresco, 1932. Detail, post-Cortesian section, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.

academic robes, attend the birth of false knowledge: a prone skeleton giving birth to a skeletal foetus.[31] It seems that Orozco was intent, in part, on providing a searing critique of the 'ivory tower' method of education, where the pursuit of knowledge undisturbed by any need to apply its conclusions to the real, external world leads to complacent self-importance. Above all, this passage is a stinging attack on the indifference to the crisis of modern civilization, implicitly expressed in the flaming background of the composition, a motif first featured in the earlier image of Cortez's arrival in Mexico.

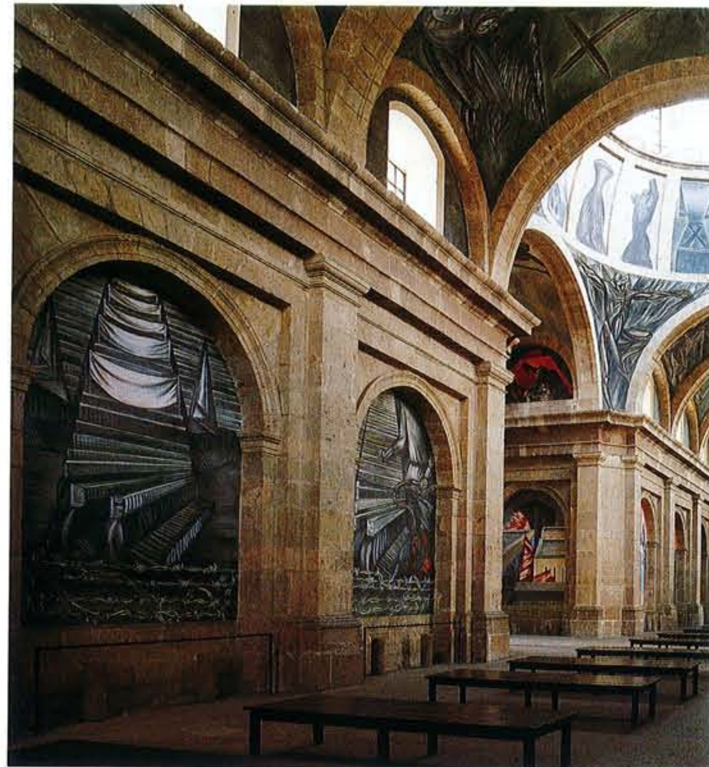
The circularity of Orozco's historical treatment becomes apparent in the two panels painted on the far end of the west wall. In the first, *Modern Human Sacrifice*, Orozco painted a mirror image of the horrific ritual of the ancient Indian world. Here is modern American civilization's equivalent: nationalism. Young men are sacrificed on the altar of the modern battlefield for the advancement of this cause and for its defence. Orozco denounces this phenomenon in a tragic image, picturing the dead torso of an unknown soldier, whose body lies over a burning candle and whose head is draped with a flag which bears a composite of the emblems of various national flags. Around this figure are apologists for this gratuitous sacrifice: a wreath of remembrance and a figure reading a funeral sermon.

The concluding panel of the mural cycle at Dartmouth, the *Modern Migration of the Spirit*, is a judgmental image on the history that Orozco has presented of the American continent in the preceding panels. The image is a deliberate play on the prophecy of Quetzalcoatl, who vowed on departure to return to build another civilization. Orozco's use of the monumental Christ figure in this final panel, returned to earth only to hack down his cross in condemnation of all that he sees as having been done in his name, is likewise a replaying of the Quetzalcoatl theme of the condemnation of his people's worship of false gods. This time the worship is of false knowledge, money and power, and the violence of blind nationalism. The junk heap of the weapons of war and the trash of industrial culture in the background of the composition reinforce Orozco's deeply pessimistic view of the modernity arrived at by contemporary American civilization.[32]

Orozco configured the history of the American continent as a

series of composite images in his fresco cycle at Dartmouth, which can be broken down further. The images are not merely allusions to historical fact, but rather represent visualizations of what Orozco perceived to be the essence of a period. Looking down the whole length of this work, Orozco's methodology becomes apparent. His use of sequential images forms a loose chronology of events. However, the specific themes embedded in each of the images underscores Orozco's lack of faith in the notion of progress with time. Orozco brilliantly unifies the past with the present, but his intention was not, as was Rivera's, to construct a heroic pedigree of struggle against oppression and injustice that could form a definable identity towards which his nation could strive. The unity that Orozco creates is that of a mirror in which events of the past reflect themselves in the present and vice versa. Thus, in Orozco's mind, the Aztecs' ancient sacrificial ritual is replayed in the sacrifice of the young, unknown soldier on the altar of war and nationalism. Quetzalcoatl's judgment on the worship of false gods is no

120
José Clemente Orozco: *American Civilization – Modern Migration of the Spirit.* Fresco, 1932. Detail, post-Cortesian section, Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire.



121
José Clemente Orozco: *The Spanish Conquest of Mexico. The Mechanized Masses* and *Despotism* can be seen in the foreground. Fresco, 1938–9. Hospicio Cabañas, Guadalajara.

different from that of the modern Christ returned to cut down his cross in anger. The materialistic militarism of the conquistador is in essence the same as the spirit of the modern mechanical world wrought by the aggrandizing sentiments of modern industrial capitalism. Likewise, the golden age of the Aztecs is identified with the purposeful spirit of the rebel who strives to liberate and cast light where only the darkness of corruption reigned before. For Orozco, the struggles and events of history are part of a single conflict in which the possibilities of progress vie with the pressing forces of reaction, greed, power and corruption. Orozco's bi-focal view of American civilization is one in which the instances have changed with time but the conflict remains the same.

Such a view is also present in the configuration of the history that Orozco was to paint six years later in the Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara.[33] When Orozco returned to Mexico from the United States in 1934, he was a mature painter at the height of his career. His cycle at the Hospicio Cabañas in 1938 was the final work in a series of murals that he had painted in the city over the previous two years at the behest of the governor of Jalisco, Don Everado Torpete.

Although Orozco had set out with the express intention of conveying a historical idea of continental American civilization at Dartmouth, many of his images, particularly those pertaining to the pre-Columbian era, as well as those featuring Cortez, had specifically Mexican connections, as opposed to ones that were generally American. Whether this was mere convenience is not certain. For whatever reason, the Mexican connection creates a reading that is particularly significant, presenting the idea of an American identity rooted in Mexican and, by association, indigenous ancestry.

Many agree that the monumental fresco cycle at the Hospicio Cabañas is Orozco's greatest work. Here, in a deconsecrated church, the fifty-five-year-old artist created his cycle of *The Spanish Conquest of Mexico.*

Unlike his work at Dartmouth, here Orozco avoided an exclusively polarized view of the conquest and its consequences. He did not, for example, unquestioningly embrace the cause of pre-Hispanic Mexico, as Rivera implicitly had done. Nor did he view the Spanish conquest in an unremittingly negative light. Rather, he sought to synthesize his preoccupation concerning the polarity of the positive and negative aspects of history with his idea of Mexican history.

Orozco expressed this duality in composite images of the conquest in the vaulting, transept and aisle of the building. Through visual metaphor and simile, he evoked what he saw as the essence and character of each of the stages and consequences of the colonial subjugation and subsequent transformation of Mexico. Taken as a whole, the images that Orozco created in the transept and aisle panels fall into four sections. Within each section, Orozco ordered the images so as to represent the character of a particular aspect of transformation in the evolution of Mexican history.

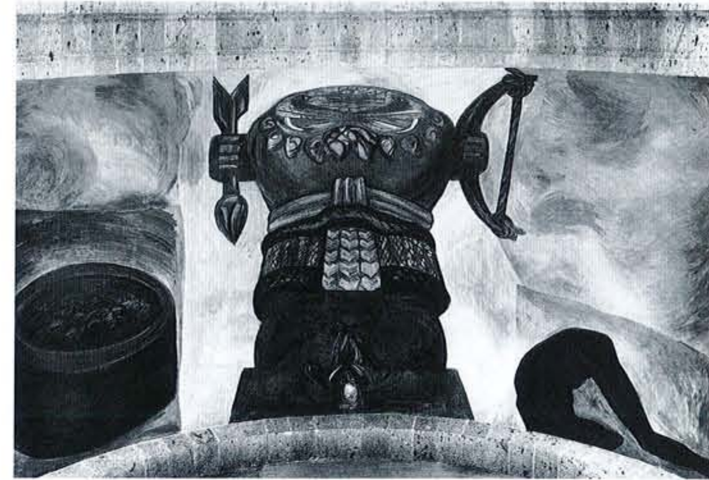
In the east and west transepts Orozco painted five images evoking the cruel and barbaric world of ancient Indian Mexico with its bloody sacrifices and macabre dance rituals of appeasement to the god of war, Huitzilopochtli. With additional images

122
José Clemente Orozco: *Huitzilipochtli*. Fresco, 1938–9. Hospicio Cabañas, west transept, vault, Guadalajara.

123 *opposite*
José Clemente Orozco: *The Spanish Conquest of Mexico – Philip the Second of Spain* (detail). Fresco, 1938–9. Hospicio Cabañas, south nave, right vault, Guadalajara.

of Franciscan priests, Indian and Spanish warriors, Orozco introduced the crucial historical moment of an Indian world about to be transformed by military and spiritual means. He continued and expanded the dual aspect of this impending transformation on the vaulted panels along the length of the nave. Here, Orozco sought to express the character of the Spanish conquest at its harshest. The Indian world is crushed and transformed by white European renaissance man at his most aggressive, acquisitive and violent. The subjugation of the Indian appears total and final. Each image in the vaulted panels is an image of plunder and transformation. A huge portrait of Philip the Second of Spain, dominated by a dark cross with the monarch's crown, evokes the monarchical Catholicism that lay at the spiritual heart of the Spanish colonial enterprise. Ensuing panels focus on what was an impressive technological force of conquest in contrast to the bare-fleshed Indian warriors portrayed by Orozco. In the two panels in the south and north naves, depicting the *Twin-Headed Horse* and *Portrait of Cortez*, imagery conveys the conquest as a symbol of modern war in both man and animal.[34] The portrait of Hernán Cortez pictured in armour, his body constructed of nuts, bolts and pistons, takes on the appearance of a machine. As Salvador Echavarria has observed, these human and animal images transformed into demonic machines portray the 'engine age in its prime, the first product of the rising science of the renaissance, which made the conquest possible'.[35] Orozco extended this visual metaphor in the image of the mechanical horse by depicting the conquering animal as a modern battle-tank. Upon its grotesquely mechanical body, the image of the heraldic lion and tower of Castille, closely resembling the turret of a tank, appears on a banner. In this threatening and monstrous apparition, Orozco created a sinister caricature of Quixote's Rozinante, whose rider follows not the noble cause of justice but that of death and destruction.

Other evocations of the subjugation of Indian Mexico are complemented in the nave by images of the subsequent cultural and spiritual transformation of Indian Mexico. In a reworking of the earlier Preparatory School fresco panel of the *Franciscan and the Indian*, Orozco shows an imposing portrait of a Franciscan priest holding a crucifix, the edges of which are



sharpened like a sword, over the head of a kneeling Indian. At the priest's side is a banner carrying the first letters of the European alphabet which, together with the sword-like crucifix, express the character of the conquest as one that was simultaneously ruthless and harsh, but charitable and forgiving.

In the side walls of the building's nave and transepts, Orozco depicted what he saw as the positive effects and benefits of European colonialism. Portraits of El Greco and Cervantes symbolize the introduction of European art and culture. The portrait of Bishop Ruíz de Cabañas, the founder of the city's orphanage, evokes the charity and help for the poor that was the legacy of the Franciscan monks. Another fresco panel explores the transformation of Indian culture into that of colonial and Mestizo culture, expressed in images of architecture.

In a deliberately iconoclastic fashion, Orozco counterposed these positive images of the colonial legacy with opposite and adjacent panels depicting the contemporary despotism of the twentieth century. This theme is condensed into panels displaying sharp satires on modern political demagogy. In deathly grey colours, modern demagogues gesticulate menacingly and people march in a faceless, spiritless mass against a foreground of barbed wire, presided over by a torso carrying a whip. For Orozco, these pessimistic views of the modern world, which can be seen in part as a thematic repetition of the concluding panels in his Dartmouth cycle, are a comment on a legacy of

124 & 125 *previous pages*
José Clemente Orozco: *The Spanish Conquest of Mexico – Portrait of Cortez* and *The Franciscan*. Fresco, 1938–9. Hospicio Cabañas, north nave, right vault and south nave, left vault. Guadalajara.

126 *below*
José Clemente Orozco: *The Spanish Conquest of Mexico – Twin-Headed Horse*. Fresco, 1938–9. Hospicio Cabañas, Guadalajara.

127 *opposite top*
José Clemente Orozco: *The Spanish Conquest of Mexico – The Wars of the Conquest*. Fresco, 1938–9. Hospicio Cabañas, north nave, central vault, Guadalajara.

128 *opposite bottom*
José Clemente Orozco: *The Spanish Conquest of Mexico – The Mechanical Horse*. Fresco, 1938–9. Hospicio Cabañas, north nave, left vault, Guadalajara.

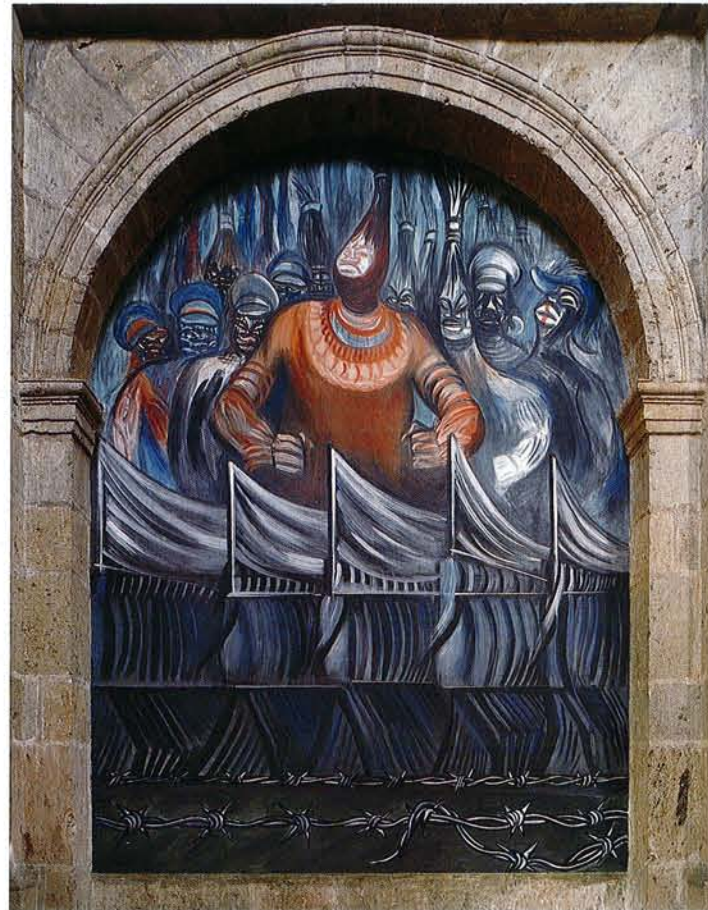
despotism that seems to extend back through the power-seeking aggrandizement that inspired the conquest, and, before that, promoted human sacrifice to the gods of war. Indeed, these images seem to underline the antithesis of the picture Orozco conveyed of the charity and benediction, culture and learning of the colonial world. It is important to stress here that the positive view of the colonial experience that Orozco chose to convey in these images is counterbalanced by his powerful and terrifying images of the despotism of the Spanish conquest.

Orozco's arguably greatest achievement and his apotheosis in the Hospicio Cabañas is the fresco in the cupola entitled *Man of Fire*, a typically personal statement on the history configured below. The image is a metaphor for the theme of social struggle as well as representing the chimera of the ideal. The *Man of Fire* is also the resurrected Christ at Dartmouth. The use of such imagery is an essential part of Orozco's powerful vocabulary, symbolizing the yawning gulf between the world of lived experience and the domain of the ideal. Unlike Rivera's notion of the ideal, Orozco's images are separate from, not an extension of, the trajectory of history.

Like Rivera's fresco cycles at the National Palace and the Cortez Palace in Cuernavaca, Orozco's mural at the Cabañas was painted during a particularly significant period in the development of post-revolutionary Mexico. The latter half of the 1930s under the presidency of Lazaro Cárdenas could be characterized as a spirited revisiting of the egalitarian and nationalist thrust of the revolutionary appeal. Cárdenas' nationalization of the oil industry in 1938, for example, marked 'the highest point of our revolution. Mexico became of age before the world by making sure that its sovereign rights would be respected, securing the basic principles of the constitution from outside attack.'[36] In the context of the political times in which it was painted, Orozco's cycle in the Hospicio Cabañas, with its ambivalent and

129
José Clemente Orozco: *Man of Fire*.
Fresco, 1938–9. Hospicio Cabañas, cupola, Guadalajara.

130
José Clemente Orozco: *The Dictators*. Fresco, 1938–9. Hospicio Cabañas, south nave, east side, south wall, Guadalajara.



sombre vision of the contemporary world, suggests a deliberately powerful rebuttal of leftist nationalist rhetoric. Likewise, the duality of the national heritage, so vividly expressed in Orozco's images, in which both the pre-Columbian past and Spanish colonialism are unequivocally charged in negative and positive terms, cuts through Rivera's one-dimensional way of constructing a framework in which Mexican national history can be seen and presented for official sanction. For Orozco, at Dartmouth but more specifically in Guadalajara, the identity of Mexican history and, by association, of the country itself, was a complex dialectic, an elusive and continually evolving process.

Both Orozco and Rivera incorporated a utopian dimension into their national vision of Mexico or the continent's history. For Rivera, the utopia was concrete: Quetzalcoatl, Cuauhtemoc, Hidalgo, Zapata, Marx and the world of the Communist revolution. For Orozco, on the other hand, the figure of Christ at Dartmouth and the man in flames at Guadalajara represented a utopian ideal that was purposely not part of the collective realization of historical experience. In Orozco's eyes, human purpose had proved too fallible for such symbols to be seen as realizable. In this sense, Orozco's vision of his country was a penetrating construction: its identity was not singular in its source, but multiplicitous. It consisted of competing and contrasting pulls, in which the duality of Mexico's pre-Columbian and Hispanic experience formed the background.

Whatever the profound differences between Rivera and Orozco's visual historical methodology, both engaged with and reflected a deeply significant process of national self-definition in the evolution of Mexican cultural and social identity. Indeed, their murals were part of that defining process, and form an element in the great panoply of Mexican nationalist culture. The Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa-Thiongo has observed that the most important area of domination by colonialism was in 'the mental universe of the colonized, the control through culture of how a people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. . . . To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others.'[37]

The epic of Mexican history and American civilization, with which Orozco and Rivera engaged in the 1930s was not confined to that decade. From the 1940s onwards Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros created murals whose subjects centred on the theme of Mexican or American history. What began in the 1930s was an engagement with the process of Mexican self-definition, a re-envisioning of the nation and its people through the epic of their collective historical experience. The murals that Orozco created at Dartmouth and at Guadalajara, together with those that Rivera painted in Mexico City and Cuernavaca became not so much the tools of Mexico's redefining of itself, as the visual and narrative vocabulary of that redefinition.