

TWO

EARLY BEGINNINGS

The Mexican mural movement began in 1921 with a burst of activity. The first murals commissioned by Vasconcelos as Secretary of Public Education were in the chapel of San Pedro y San Pablo, and among the artists commissioned were Dr. Atl, Roberto Montenegro, Xavier Guerro and Jorge Enciso. Mural commissions for the patios of the National Preparatory School, the Bolivar Amphitheatre and the Colegio Chico, all in one building in the centre of Mexico City, followed soon after. The patios of the National Preparatory School were decorated by José Clemente Orozco, Jean Charlot, Fermín Revueltas and Ramón Alva de la Canal; in 1922, Rivera began his work on the Bolivar Amphitheatre and later that year Siqueiros was commissioned to paint murals in the Colegio Chico.

When Rivera started work in the Bolivar Amphitheatre, he was already 36 and an artist of maturity, wide experience and considerable reputation. Like many Mexican painters of his generation, he trained at the Academy of San Carlos. He enrolled there in 1908, spending seven years undergoing a rigorous academic training that emphasized a thorough grounding in life-drawing and technical expertise. During this time, he was taught and influenced by many different painters, including Félix Parra, who introduced him to the art and culture of Pre-Columbian Mexico, Santiago Rebull and the landscape painter José María Velasco, who taught him landscape.

Of the many artists that influenced Rivera during his formative years, few did more than the Mexican engraver José

Guadalupe Posada. Posada's prolific output of prints represented for Rivera the vitality of Mexico's rich traditions of popular art and the most penetrating views of Mexican social life in the years before the revolution, and later influenced the imagery that Rivera used in his murals depicting the revolutionary struggles of the people through their popular traditions of folklore and political and religious festival.

Rivera's influences were not, however, exclusively Mexican. Like several other Mexican artists of the time, he travelled to Europe. With the assistance of a scholarship awarded to him by the governor of Veracruz, Teodoro Dehesa, Rivera arrived in Spain in 1907. He first went to the Madrid studio of the Spanish painter Eduardo Chicharro, an introduction made under the auspices of Dr. Atl.

Whilst in Spain, Rivera visited the Prado Museum, making copies of paintings by Goya, Velázquez, El Greco, Bruegel and Bosch. In 1909 he left Spain to travel through France, Belgium and England. In the summer of that year he visited London where he studied the work of Constable, Blake and Turner. He also visited the capital's notorious East End, making drawings of its slums, street life and factories.

In November 1910, Rivera returned briefly to Mexico for an exhibition of his work as part of the official centennial celebrations for the War of Independence against Spanish colonial rule. He stayed only a short time, leaving Mexico in June 1911 to return once more to Paris.



Although Rivera travelled widely in Europe during the years that he lived there, Paris and later Italy were the centres of art that most influenced his intellectual and aesthetic development. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Paris was the centre of European artistic innovation. Not only was it at the heart of the Cubist revolution, but it also functioned as a cultural intersection where nearly all the leading intellectual, artistic and political figures of the period lived or visited. Europe's own cultural revolution engaged him artistically and intellectually in ways that had a profound influence on his development as a mural painter.

The impact of Cubism on Rivera was immense. For four years, influenced by the examples of Picasso, Braque and Juan Gris, Rivera immersed himself in the movement, contributing much to its diversity of style. Although he never forgot the lessons of

Cubism, the movement ultimately proved inadequate for Rivera's need to express the social and political realities that were increasingly engaging his attention. His famous *Zapatista Landscape* painting of 1915 (Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City) to some extent successfully combined avant-garde Cubist language with Mexican revolutionary and landscape imagery. But the unresolved contradictions that arose from this attempted synthesis made change inevitable. In his own words, Rivera ceased to paint using Cubist techniques because 'of the war, the Russian revolution, and . . . the belief in the need for a popular and socialized art. It had to be a functional art related to the world and the times, and had to help the masses for a better social organization. In Cubism there are many elements that do not fit this specific need.'¹

Rivera's move away from Cubism was sudden and signalled the reaffirmation of a more traditional and classical approach in his art. Cézanne, then Ingres, Renoir and Gauguin became the focus of his attentions. The portrait of *The Mathematician* (1918; Col. Dolores Olmedo), the drawings of *Chirokof* (1917; Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts), *Angeline Beloff* (1917; Museum of Modern Arts, New York) and the painting of *The Grape Picker* (1920; private collection) reflect the dramatic break with Cubism. The paintings of these years also parallel Rivera's own political and intellectual development. The art critic Elie Fauré, the realities of the First World War and the combined political and social influence of Russian and Mexican émigré friends on Rivera, with their first-hand accounts of political developments in both countries, helped to radicalize and politicize the ideological and aesthetic framework of Rivera's thinking. Thus, when Rivera met Siqueiros for the first time in 1919, the ideological terrain on which he held discussions with Siqueiros on the future course of Mexican art had already begun to be formed in his thinking.

Persuaded by Alberto Pani, the Mexican Ambassador to Paris, and José Vasconcelos, Rector of the University of Mexico, to study the frescoes of the renaissance, Rivera travelled to Italy in 1920. Like Siqueiros' own pilgrimage in the same year, the visit formed a final and most significant stage in Rivera's development in the years preceding the birth of Mexican muralism.

Rivera spent seventeen months in Italy studying Byzantine,

Etruscan and renaissance art. The frescoes of the renaissance occupied most of his attention, and of these and many other works Rivera created over 300 sketches and drawings. He also continued to explore what for him was by then a growing concern: the concept of a public and socialized art, an idea championed by Elie Fauré. It was also a subject that had occupied many of the conversations that Siqueiros and Rivera had held in Paris the previous year, concerning the profound implications the Mexican revolution would have for the future of Mexico's culture and the important role visual artists could play in that culture.

When Rivera returned to Mexico in 1921 to take part in Vasconcelos' programme of public mural commissions, he had spent the best part of fourteen years abroad. Except for the short period when he had returned to Mexico in 1910–1911, he had witnessed nothing of the tumultuous events of the revolution that had so changed his country.

By contrast, José Clemente Orozco had seen much of the revolution at first hand. Born in Zapotlán el Grande, in the state of Jalisco, in 1883, Orozco was the oldest of 'los tres Grandes'. Like Rivera, he trained at the Academy of San Carlos, enrolling there in 1906. Under the regime set by the Academy's director, Antonio Fabrés, Orozco 'thrived . . . on a stiff academic diet, zealously copied plaster casts and photographs, and trained his hand and eye to the inhuman objectivity of a camera.'²

During his years at the Academy, Orozco was exposed to a wide variety of artists and influences. Through Julio Ruelas, 'the painter of cadavers, satyrs, drowned men and suicidal lovers', Orozco was introduced to Symbolism. While the widely influential and much-read art journal *Revista Moderna* (1898–1911) championed Symbolism, it also contained illustrations of the work of many leading European modernists of the time and was one of the few sources in which Mexican artists could see the new work being produced in Europe.

One of the most decisive influences on Orozco in the early pre-mural period of his career was Dr. Atl, whose championing of renaissance art for its spiritual qualities coincided with Orozco's interest in Symbolism. In his autobiography, Orozco later recalled the profound impression made on him by the character of Dr. Atl as one of his tutors at the Academy.

26 In 1912 Orozco set up his first studio, moving away from the world of academic training to embark on a series of drawings and watercolours of prostitutes which became known as *The House of Tears*. 'I opened a studio in Illescas street', he wrote in his autobiography,

in a neighborhood plagued with luxurious houses of the most magnificent notoriety, which sheltered 'embassies' from France, Africa, the Caribbean, and North and Central America. Out in the open air the Barbazonians were painting very pretty landscapes, with the requisite violets for the shadows and Nile green for the skies, but I preferred black and the colours exiled from Impressionist palettes. Instead of red and yellow twilight, I painted the pestilent shadows of closed rooms, and instead of the Indian male, drunken ladies and gentlemen.³

In addition to the *House of Tears* series, Orozco also made a number of drawings of young girls, as well as numerous studies on paper of popular street life.

Apart from the powerful tragic and expressive work of his brothel scenes, during this period Orozco also produced political and social caricatures. The influence of Posada is unmistakable in these. Orozco spoke of the importance of Posada when he wrote how, as a young man, he would pass by the printer's workshop and see Posada working 'in full view, behind the shop window, and on my way to school and back, four times a day I would stop and spend one or two enchanted minutes in watching him. . . . This was the push that first set my inspiration in motion and impelled me to cover paper with my earliest figures; this was my awakening to the existence of the art of painting . . .'.⁴ The cartoons and social caricatures that Orozco created during this period also reveal the profound iconoclasm present in so much of Orozco's work. He drew biting satires for the two anti-Madero newspapers, *El Imparcial* and *El Hijo del Ahuizote*. One caricature, printed in *El Ahuizote* in 1913 and entitled *Congressional Cinema*, satirized Madero politicians and depicted Madero himself as a chick-pea.

In November 1914, with the competing armies of Francisco Villa, Emiliano Zapata and Eulalio Gutiérrez about to enter the capital, Orozco left Mexico City, with other student colleagues from the Academy, to follow Dr. Atl to the town of Orizaba, a move prompted by General Carranza's decision to evacuate the



city and go south to the state of Veracruz to set up his headquarters. Atl, a fervent supporter of Carranza (Carranza had appointed him Director of the Academy in 1913), had decided to lend support and live and work in Orizaba, where he edited the Constitutionalist army newspaper *La Vanguardia*. While in Orizaba, Orozco made drawings and cartoons for *La Vanguardia*, which was produced in a church and 'distributed by its staff from troop trains that shuttled endlessly in darkness from bivouac to battlefield to hospital to bivouac'.⁵

Although Orozco was not directly involved in combat during the revolution, he nevertheless witnessed its ravages firsthand, which provoked a mass of contradictory reactions in him. In his autobiography he claimed 'no part in the revolution. I came to no harm, . . . and I ran no danger at all. To me the revolution was the gayest and most diverting of carnivals.' Later, however, he would record more accurately the tragedy he witnessed:

Trains back from the battlefield unloaded their cargoes in the station of Orizaba: the wounded, the tired, exhausted, mutilated soldiers, sweating . . . in the world of politics it was the same, war without quarter, struggle for power and wealth, factions and subfactions were past counting, the thirst for vengeance insatiable. . . . Farce, drama, barbarity . . . A parade of stretchers with the wounded in bloody rags, and all at once the savage pealing of the bells and a thunder of rifle fire.⁶

The drawings and the cartoons of this period reflect the impact of the tragedy that Orozco witnessed. His tone was caustic and uncompromising. On the front cover of *La Vanguardia* of 10 May 1915 he drew the face of a laughing girl with a dagger and a knife in front of her face and with the caption 'I Am The Revolution, The Destructor'. Another image depicted the failure of the reform parties, with 'No Re-election' invited by 'Effective Suffrage' to join him and all the other revolutionary ideals in a common grave.

In 1916 Orozco left the ravages of the battlefields in Orizaba and returned to Mexico City. There he took part in a group exhibition intended by Carranza to tour the United States with 'the double purpose of introducing Mexican culture to foreign parts, and to open a market for the exhibitors.'⁷ Though the exhibition never toured, its private showing brought an enthusiastic response to Orozco's work from Raziél Cabildo, who wrote that Orozco's art was the 'most discussed and least appreciated. . . . That this artist displeases is natural, his idiosyncrasies being at odds with the well-worn clichés revered by a public bred to the cult of prettiness.'⁸ Orozco also had a one-man show of his work in the *Librería Biblos* in September. However, Mexico City in 1916 was no place for an artist, dislocated as it was by battles of the revolution. Furthermore, despite Cabildo's apparently positive remarks, Orozco was disillusioned with the overall negative response to his work: 'I have supported patiently the flood of epithets which the public let loose upon my head on account of that hapless exhibit', he wrote, 'but when in a widely read newspaper I am insulted in such fashion, I cannot remain quiet longer. . . .'⁹ The following year, finding no real prospects in Mexico, Orozco went to the United States, first to San Francisco and then to New York.¹⁰ In San Francisco he worked for a while as a sign painter. While in New York, living in extreme poverty, Orozco earned a meagre wage painting dolls' faces.

Orozco returned to Mexico City in 1920, where he set up a studio in Coyoacán, and worked as a newspaper cartoonist. He was still disillusioned and largely ignored as a painter. In a later article written for *International Studio* in 1923, the art critic Walter Pach stated that 'Orozco gave up his life work because he sadly realized that . . . he meant nothing to a public hopelessly incap-

able of appreciating his gifts.'¹¹ However, both Walter Pach and the poet Juan Tablada were highly enthusiastic about Orozco, and their ringing public endorsements of his talents as an artist were largely responsible for bringing Orozco back into the public eye and to the attention of José Vasconcelos.

For whatever reason, whether because Orozco was regarded more as a cartoonist, or because of his political opposition at one time to Madero, whom Vasconcelos fervently supported, Vasconcelos did not initially include him in the programme of public mural commissions. Orozco's eventual commission was largely due to the support of Tablada. At an important farewell gathering given by the Cultural Board of Mexico City for Tablada in February 1923, prior to his departure for the United States, the poet had called publicly on the Mexico City council to commission Orozco to decorate a wall in the reception room of the City Hall.¹² Although the mayor did not take up the idea, Vasconcelos did, and on 7 July 1923 Orozco began his first murals on the walls of the central patio in the National Preparatory School.

By the time Orozco embarked on his first mural commission, David Alfaro Siqueiros had already completed his first mural for José Vasconcelos on the walls of the Colegio Chico. The youngest of 'los tres Grandes', Siqueiros was born in 1896 in Chihuahua. Like Rivera and Orozco, Siqueiros also undertook his early training at the Academy of San Carlos. He entered the Academy in 1911, when the revolution was already a year old and Francisco Madero still held the reins of power. In this context, the circumstances of Siqueiros' training were quite different to those of his two predecessors.

Although Siqueiros was only fifteen when he entered the Academy, both its teachers and the teaching methods employed there left an indelible impression upon him. Siqueiros was subjected to an antiquated, rigid academic teaching environment. There were long periods of drawing from the nude and clothed figure, endless still-life projects and hours of copying classical Greek plaster casts. The system employed at the time under the director, Antonio Rivas Mercado, was modelled after the French academician Pillet.¹³ The academic teaching methods soon became subject to opposition. Amongst those the students criticized most was the professor of anatomy, Dr. Vagare Lope.

28 Lope's particular 'crime' was to require students to buy and then copy mimeographed sheets that had been traced from the pages of Richter's *Anatomy*. Petitioned by the students to put a stop to this practice, Rivas Mercado refused. What had started as a purely intercurricular problem soon escalated into political confrontation, and on 28 July 1911 the students declared a strike, demanding the director's resignation.

The extent of Siqueiros' involvement in the strike at the Academy, which lasted a year, is difficult to assess. He was still a young teenager, and by his own admission he appears only to have 'throw(n) a few stones at things, or people, and little else'.¹⁴ Of the strike itself, Siqueiros noted 'It is not very important that this activity was mainly destructive and devoid of integral solutions, because at the time the important objective was the destruction of the old system, which had ruined so many generations. . . . so that the way could be prepared for a new progressive system of art teaching.'¹⁵ The strike at the Academy resulted in the closing down of the institution. The students were partly successful in their demands, for eventually their favourite figure, Alfredo Ramos Martínez, was appointed director in place of Rivas Mercado. Martínez transformed the teaching methods and at the same time opened up the famous open-air school in the suburb of Santa Anita. Siqueiros attended these open-air classes briefly, but the neo-impressionism taught at this time was less important for him than the groundswell of thinking among many artists and intellectuals for Mexican subject-matter. Siqueiros wrote that

The young painters Herrán and Francisco de la Torre on the one hand and Tellez on the other began to exercise a powerful influence of 'nationalist' thinking in us. Herrán and De la Torre started to employ exclusively local themes. . . . we used to speak of the Mexicanization of the plastic arts in our country. . . . We discussed the necessity of depicting Mexican landscape, Mexican types and even to depict the problems of Mexico.¹⁶

Like Orozco, Siqueiros was profoundly affected and influenced by the personality of Dr. Atl. Siqueiros first came into contact with Atl when he was appointed director of the Academy in 1914. In his *Memorias*, Siqueiros recalled how influential Atl's ideas on Italian renaissance art had been for him, as well as his striving to introduce new teaching methods.

Atl's crucial role in influencing the students of the Academy to join with him in the military and political struggle of the Mexican Revolution when he moved to Orizaba in 1914 was also largely instrumental in leading Siqueiros to enlist in the military forces of the constitutional armies and eventually to fight in one of the bloodiest civil wars of this century. Initially Siqueiros helped to edit Atl's newspaper *La Vanguardia*, as well as acting as its military correspondent.

Though it is uncertain whether Siqueiros actually took part in any combat while he was in Orizaba with Dr. Atl – he eventually transferred to Veracruz, where Carranza had moved to set up his headquarters – his military career was one of rapid promotion. In only two years he rose from private soldier to the rank of second captain in General Díguez's western division. He took part in several important campaigns during the revolution, such as that against Francisco Villa and the battles of Guadalajara, Trinidad, Lagos de Morena, Leon and the eventual capture of Aguascalientes. During this period he witnessed summary executions and terrible sufferings. In addition to the psychological effects these experiences had on Siqueiros, he considered that they added considerably to his understanding of

The Indian, the Spanish and popular tradition of the country, of the human beings that lived together, that worked together, fought together in our land, that is the labouring masses, workers, peasants, artisans and Indian tribes. . . . It led to a direct reflection of the immense cultural traditions of our country, particularly with regard to the extraordinary Pre-Colombian civilizations . . . we did not realize in reality the real measure of the values that our nation contained. . . .¹⁷

When Siqueiros returned to Mexico City in 1918 and started to paint again, the way in which his art would develop stylistically was foretold by Raziél Cabildo in an article in which he wrote that Siqueiros was 'an opulent colorist, master of an ample and vigorous technique. He wraps his personages in harmonies of audacity not free from extravagance. . . . The dancers of Siqueiros are a whirlwind of limbs and maddening drapes of painted flesh disjointed and with incredible foreshortenings.'¹⁸ In addition to this, the drawings that Siqueiros produced at the time began to indicate an approach to subject-matter that reflected a more political and social content. Cabildo highlighted the

18 above
Encampment of the Federal army,
1913.



19 below
Passing food to Federal soldiers on
their way to fight, 1913.



drawing of *El Señor Verano*, in which Siqueiros depicted a black Christ on a cross flanked by armed Zapatistas praying. The critic also remarked on the use of contrasting images in the drawing *Sugar Skulls* in which Siqueiros depicted a bourgeois girl with her skipping rope next to a squatting Indian selling his wares on the Day of the Dead.¹⁹

Though indications of more direct social content appeared in Siqueiros' work during this period, it seems that in terms of his

development as a painter the years of the revolution were ones of absorption – of ideas, experiences and influences. This absorption ultimately provided the basis for a theoretical and ideological understanding of a new revolutionary art, rather than for any contemporary depiction of it.

This particular aspect of the revolution's influence on Siqueiros was reflected in his thinking during 1919 in Guadalajara, where he went to live after leaving Mexico City. There he came into contact with a radical group of painters who had taken part in the revolution. They were collectively known as the *Centro Bohemio* and their studio became a meeting place for discussion. The discussions that Siqueiros held there on the future role and direction of art in the revolutionary Mexican society were of seminal importance for they formed a large part of the ideological framework for the mural artists' activities during the 1920s. Siqueiros recalled how he and his colleagues asked themselves 'For whom are we going to produce art? What object should it have? Was it to be a work of use to a laboratory, that would later be of service to us in some way? No, we knew that we were not going to do that any longer. Above all we knew that we were going to make a change.'²⁰

Arising out of these discussions, Siqueiros and other artists of the *Centro Bohemio* published their ideas concerning the role of art in a revolutionary society in the journal *El Occidental*. Many of the ideas closely paralleled those which Dr. Atl had formulated some years earlier, in particular, the importance of a state art. The examples they cited included ancient Greece, Egypt, China, Peru, Central America and Mexico. Religious art was seen as another case in point, the aim of which was transmitting ideas, concepts, philosophic thoughts and political ideologies. They argued that such precedents formed a model which should be followed by artists in the new Mexican revolutionary society. The reality of Mexican society, however, was such that there were no governmental means or even sympathy for the practical realization and development of these ideas. In addition, Siqueiros and his fellow artists in Guadalajara had little firsthand experience of much of the art they were presenting as the model for their revolutionary aesthetic; they had been, as Siqueiros put it, 'practically disconnected from the outside world'.²¹

The influence that the Mexican revolution had on Siqueiros cannot be separated from the three years he spent in Europe from 1919 to 1921. These experiences formed a final pattern of thinking that culminated in the publication of his historic manifesto, 'Three Calls to American Painters: Detrimental Influences and Tendencies', in the Barcelona magazine *Vida Americana* in 1921.

Siqueiros left Mexico in 1919 with the aid of a government scholarship and the appointment of a minor diplomatic post, primarily to see the art of the Italian renaissance. However, he first came into contact with modern French art. In Paris, the Catalan painter Pruna and the Castilian Escalera, with whom Siqueiros struck up a friendship, became important sources of introduction to leading French artists of the time, of whom the painter Fernand Léger was to prove an enduring influence. Siqueiros met Léger on many occasions, often in Siqueiros' own studio in the Impasse de Rouet. Léger and Siqueiros had shared the experience of fighting in wars at parallel moments in history. While Siqueiros had experienced combat in the Mexican revolution, Léger had been with the French army during the 1914–1918 War in Europe. Their reactions to their common experiences were remarkably similar,²² and with Siqueiros eager and receptive to modern French painting, it was natural that Léger would exert an influence on the young Mexican. Although Siqueiros admitted that their friendship did not exclude frequent private controversies, mostly provoked by Siqueiros' calls for a return to public art and his sarcasms against easel painting, nevertheless through these conversations he developed his lasting interest in the aesthetic of the machine. This later manifested itself in Siqueiros' Barcelona manifesto, 'Three Timely Calls to American Painters' in which the artist stated 'Love the modern machine, dispenser of unexpected plastic emotions, contemporary aspects of our daily life, our cities in the process of construction, the sober and practical engineer of our modern building.'²³ Although the passage has striking similarities to the rhetoric of the Futurists, Siqueiros himself claimed that it was Léger as much as the Futurists who was responsible for his preoccupation with the machine aesthetic.

Although there is little extant work from his period in Paris, Siqueiros appears to have been much absorbed by Cubism.

However, by 1919 Siqueiros had noted that Rivera, with whom he was now in close and frequent contact, had begun to move away from Cubism and to return to a descriptive figuration, based on a more solid, classical approach to the human form. In this, Siqueiros seemed to see a connection between the solidity contained in the images of Cézanne and the images of the machine in the paintings of Léger. The example of Cézanne struck a powerful chord with Siqueiros, for to him Cézanne's work appeared closely to parallel the monumentality that characterized the Italian renaissance murals that Dr. Atl had spoken of in 1914. Siqueiros found in Cézanne solidity and a modern realization of monumentality that Impressionism had scattered into fragments of light and Cubism into fragments of form. It was inevitable, therefore, that with Cézanne in mind, in his manifesto Siqueiros would later write of 'the great primary masses: the cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders, pyramids, which should be the scaffolding of all plastic arts. . . . The fundamental basis of a work of art is the magnificent geometric structure of form and concept of the interplay of volume and perspective, which combine to create depth, to create spatial volumes.'²⁴

Besides the significance of Cézanne, Léger and Cubism, Italian Futurism was especially important during this period for Siqueiros. Although he disagreed with many Futurist attitudes, particularly Marinetti's wish to 'destroy the painting of the museums',²⁵ he was particularly struck by the group's theoretical proposals concerning the nature of movement and its realization in pictorial form. His identification with the Futurists' concern for the depiction of movement, their preoccupation with the machine aesthetic and the clearly agitational nature of their manifestos anticipates much of the work, both theoretical and practical, that he would undertake in the 1930s when he established the foundation of his radical aesthetic.

Siqueiros left Paris in 1920 to visit Italy, principally to see what the Futurists had so disdained: the great paintings of the Italian renaissance and the Baroque. Of the paintings he saw, those which most impressed him were the frescoes of Masaccio, and he made studies of those in the Brancacci chapel in Florence. The Italian master's extraordinary realism, his sobriety of gesture, narrative power and the solidity of his forms represented for Siqueiros the monumentality that Atl had spoken of in 1914.

Although Siqueiros was probably unaware of its importance at the time, he also observed the way in which Masaccio had achieved 'the added power to control the onlooker's attention gained through the use of several points of view within a single composition.'²⁶ Siqueiros was also deeply impressed by the paintings of the Baroque. Their use of optical illusion, particularly in connection with the creation of 'architectural space', emerged in his later murals, where he employed the dynamics of architectural space to create his own extraordinary optical illusions and multi-angular perspectives.

The initial links between Siqueiros and Rivera were forged in Europe. Although the relationship between the two artists frequently went through periods of open hostility and antagonism in later years, the discussions between them in Paris in 1919–20 were vital to the development of Mexican muralism, influencing the thinking of both artists. Siqueiros later wrote as a result of these meetings and exchanges 'Afterwards it was possible for me to express myself theoretically in the manifesto that I published in Barcelona in 1921. . . . Though inarticulate, it constituted the first publication of what we had spoken about in Mexico over many years. It was also the result of what I had gained in Europe. The fusion in effect of the material that Rivera and I exchanged.'²⁷

The manifesto that Siqueiros wrote in Barcelona has become part of the folklore of the Mexican mural renaissance. Paradoxically, for all its notoriety, in many ways its proposals were rather vague. The manifesto contained not a single reference or call for a public art, nor for an art of social and political content. Rather, it extended 'a rational welcome to every source of spiritual renewal from Cézanne onwards', referring specifically to Cubism and Futurism, as well as stressing the importance of the classical canons of painting.²⁸ The obvious identification with European modernism in the first 'call' was reiterated in the second, entitled 'The Preponderance of the Constructive Over the Decorative'. Siqueiros wrote of a formal aesthetic based on construction and solidity, linked to the art of the primitives and of Africa: 'Our physical proximity to (the Pre-Columbian societies) will help us to absorb the constructive vigour of their work, in which there is

evident knowledge of the elements of nature. . . . We must become *universal*; our *racial* and *local* elements will inevitably appear in our work.'²⁹

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In a broad sense, the Barcelona manifesto was, as Siqueiros later admitted, a theoretical cocktail, a synthesis of his own and Rivera's respective experiences and thoughts which they had exchanged and developed in Paris. It was perhaps only coincidentally significant for the beginnings of the Mexican mural movement. Its publication in May 1921 in the only issue of *Vida Americana* to be published, coincided with the first mural commissions handed out by Vasconcelos as Minister of Education. An article in the July edition of *El Universal*, entitled 'The Painter Siqueiros in Barcelona', reported that Siqueiros was the director of the 'important magazine *Vida Americana* published in Barcelona'. The article failed to give any details of the manifesto. The importance of the manifesto must thus be limited to its representation of Siqueiros' initial ideas rather than a defined focus of action for mural painting around which the nascent mural movement in Mexico gathered.

Indicative of this fact are the delays and excuses Siqueiros made to Vasconcelos about returning to Mexico from May 1921 until his eventual return in August 1922. As late as November 1921, when Rivera was already back in Mexico and about to begin his first mural in the Bolivar Amphitheatre, the Mexican Minister to the Honduras, Juan Dios de Bojórquez, wrote a letter on Siqueiros' behalf to Vasconcelos, indicating Siqueiros' eagerness to remain longer in Europe.³⁰

Siqueiros eventually returned to Mexico, but only after repeated urgings by Vasconcelos. In a letter sent shortly before his return, he wrote to Vasconcelos that 'I find myself in total agreement with your basic idea: to create a new civilization extracted from the very bowels of Mexico, and firmly believe that our youth will rally to this banner. . . . (I owe my desire to return) specifically to your own intelligent initiative concerning art. . . .'³¹ In September 1922 Siqueiros heeded the calls of the Minister for Public Education and returned home to Mexico. Three months later he finally began work on his first murals in the Colegio Chico.

