

THREE

THE MURALS OF THE 1920s

FESTIVAL, REVOLT AND TRADITION

The murals commissioned by Vasconcelos in 1921 were perhaps the principal component of the unique process of national cultural renewal that took place in Mexico in the early part of the twentieth century. The revolution had been the catalyst for this renewal, but the reassertion of the rich traditions of Mexican culture after 400 years of colonial subjugation preceded it. Even under Porfirio Díaz, the intellectual momentum of radical and popular cultural nationalism had asserted itself, to be synthesized by such key figures as the anthropologist Manuel Gamio in his seminal work of 1916, *Forjando Patria* (Forging the Fatherland). Groups such as the *Ateneo de la Juventud* had become a focus for the country's radical nationalist intellectuals, many of whom figured prominently in the vanguard of the cultural renaissance of the 1920s.

The murals painted by Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros during the 1920s can be divided into two groups. The first consists of works commissioned by Vasconcelos and completed before the end of his term of office in 1924, and which seem to mirror the ideological and aesthetic framework of his own particular philosophical vision. The second group are works – some of which were commissioned by Vasconcelos and even executed during his tenure as Minister of Education – with themes and styles that moved away from his vision towards a more overtly didactic, political and populist art, with which the Mexican mural movement has come to be popularly associated.¹

Rivera's first mural, *Creation*, is typical of the first group.

Painted at the Bolivar Amphitheatre between early 1922 and January 1923, it exhibited many of the uncertain and apparently contradictory beginnings of the Mexican mural movement. Like the other early murals, neither its theme nor its style was conceived within any popular or radical Mexican tradition. Instead, it was created within an intellectual and aesthetic framework characterized by 'the moral imperatives of Judeo-Christian religion and the intellectual standards of Hellenic civilization; in the latter case in particular the premise of the astronomer-philosopher Pythagoras . . .'.² Whether it was due to the influence of Vasconcelos' highly individualistic philosophical idealism or to the weight of experience derived from his European past, Rivera's first mural – like the initial ones painted by Orozco and Siqueiros – had yet to cross the divide separating that past from the world of Mexico's revolutionary present.

Assisted by the painters Jean Charlot (1898–1980), Xavier Guerrero (1896–1974) and Amado de la Cueva (1891–1926), Rivera presented an allegory in his *Creation* that is stylistically characterized by Italian and Byzantine influences. Antonio Rodríguez described *Creation* as a 'poetic and philosophical medley of Christianity and paganism; symbols of knowledge and wisdom, constellations, haloes and angels' wings alternate in it with muses and the three cardinal virtues'.³ The mural expresses the idea of creation as the product of the dual aspects of male and female in the human race, and the natural elements of earth and water, air and fire. Although the Italianate character of the



composition displayed Rivera's debt to Italian fresco painting, the mural did not escape entirely from the influence of cultural nationalism that was sweeping the country at the time. The features of the women are clearly those of the Mexican *Mestizo*, a significant anticipation of Rivera's later concentration on essentially Mexican subject-matter.

This shift towards a more emphatic Mexicanism was articulated more explicitly in the recessed central area of the mural. Rivera conceptualized the imagery here quite differently from that of the foreground area. Set against the Italianate and Cubist imagery of the main wall area, the luxuriantly tropical hue of this portion of the mural, with its abundant plant life, exotic animals and indigenous figures, was, as Jean Charlot has described it, a 'stylistic duality... but inasmuch as it tells the story of the artist's change of heart, it remains valuable as an index to Rivera's Mexican evolution'.⁴

The transformation in Rivera's vision from an exclusively European aesthetic to one rooted in the spirit of Mexican nationalism was in large part the result of the influence of both Vasconcelos and the painter Adolfo Best Maugard. Rivera's dis-

covery of the indigenous character and nature of his country was stimulated to a considerable extent by Best Maugard's lectures on Mexican art. Maugard's influence, as Vasconcelos noted, 'inclined (Rivera) towards national themes'.⁵ But for all his philosophical idealism, Vasconcelos also had nationalist credentials and beliefs. His desire to send Rivera to Tehuantepec in the southern part of Mexico at the end of 1922, for Rivera to familiarize himself with his country after such a long absence from it, became a key component in the changes that afterwards occurred in Rivera's work. Tehuantepec proved to be something of a revelation for the painter, who previously had known nothing of the exotic southern areas of Mexico. As Jean Charlot has written, Rivera began to look 'his own country in the face and find her beautiful and his Italian memory gradually faded'.⁶ As a result, he returned to Mexico City with a different spirit, clearly reflected in the nature of his imagery.

Rivera's *Creation* was inaugurated in March 1923 to widely differing opinions. Some praised it, considering it to be a nationalist work. Orozco, however, was among those who were sceptical of its worth. 'Incomprehensible', he wrote, 'are those

pseudocubistic pictures done according to so-called scientific recipes imported from Paris. No-one understands such painting, not even he who makes it. Some verses are spelled very nicely and polished magnificently, yet they are worth a peanut. Some paintings boast of the golden proportion and that famous cubistic technique; they are worth another peanut.⁷

At the end of 1922, a few months before the inauguration of Rivera's first mural, Siqueiros, who had returned from Europe in September, began his decoration of the walls in the Colegio Chico, Vasconcelos having given him the choice of where to paint. His choice was hardly auspicious, selecting as he did a rather small and badly-lit staircase. Like Rivera's *Creation*, the mural was painted in encaustic, and depicted a bulky, apparently



foreshortened, winged angel figure. Painted onto the ceiling panel of the staircase, its imagery was derived more from Siqueiros' European experience and memories than anything intrinsically Mexican. *The Elements*, as Siqueiros entitled his first mural, later reminded Rivera 'of a somewhat Syrio-Lebanese Michelangelo'.⁸ One critic reacted to the work by linking Siqueiros with Rivera as the importers 'of the latest European trend and as a result the good tradition'.⁹

Siqueiros himself was later decidedly more self-critical about his first attempt, and recorded the difficulties of creating public art in post-revolutionary Mexico. 'For my part', he wrote

I painted the elements: Fire, earth, water etc., inspired by the figure of an angel, more or less in a colonial style. You can imagine the chaos – but it was a chaos appropriate to a world in which public art, 'art for everyone' had disappeared. There was no one to tell us 'Do this and now do that'. We wanted to help the Mexican revolution, but we were doing a very bad job of it. What we were doing as public art might well have been interesting from the point of view of general culture, but from the point of view of what we were going through at the time it was hopeless.¹⁰

The contemporary comments on Siqueiros' work as an importation of 'the latest European trend' also pointed to the cultural uncertainties and contradictions surrounding the birth of the mural movement that Vasconcelos had brought into being. Such uncertainties affected not only the choice of imagery used by the painters in their first murals, but also, as in the case of Rivera and Siqueiros, the medium in which they executed their work.

The encaustic employed in Siqueiros' first work was not exclusively in response to Rivera's impressive handling of the same difficult medium. It was also in part linked to attitudes held at the time by Vasconcelos. In the months preceding the paintings of Rivera's *Creation*, discussions among the painters concerning the most appropriate medium for use in mural painting were intense. Attempts to translate from an old copy of a volume on the techniques of Italian fresco painting written by Cellino Cennini had proved to be problematic, particularly since many of the mentioned ingredients were unknown to the Mexican painters. Rivera argued that encaustic was, in his view, more durable, a

36 position that many of his colleagues accepted, particularly on seeing his impressive handling of the medium in *Creation*.

However, Vasconcelos' own attitudes influenced the techniques adopted, for he had quickly grown impatient with the fruitless researches of the painters into the fresco recipes of Cennini, arguing with a perverse sense of Mexican cultural nationalism that since Cennini had never been to Mexico, his techniques must be inferior. Rivera decided to adopt the encaustic medium, despite it being no more Mexican than the classic Italian fresco techniques of Cennini and this paved the way for some of the other painters, including Siqueiros, to follow suit.

The encaustic medium was eventually abandoned by Rivera in favour of the much easier fresco technique. However, he did so only after Xavier Guerrero, while assisting Rivera with his first panels in the Ministry of Education in 1923–4, helped develop a fresco technique that his father had used, discovering through trips to the pre-Columbian site of Teotihuacan that it was similar to techniques employed in the ancient Toltec society. In the highly charged nationalistic climate of the time, this simple technical development was taken up by the press who, in a classic example of distortion and wild embellishment, publicized it under blazing headlines, such as 'Diego Rivera Discovers a Secret of the Mexica', presenting it as 'the process used by ancient Mexicans to produce their splendid frescoes, such as those we admire at San Juan Teotihuacan'.¹¹ Despite the somewhat distorted history behind the more widespread adoption of the classic fresco technique, the nationalistic embellishments nevertheless served to legitimize the use of the medium and technique, during a period when the climate of cultural *indigenismo* was at its most passionate.

Orozco's first murals, begun at the National Preparatory School in 1923, displayed the same contradictions as those painted earlier by Rivera and Siqueiros: images created amidst the climate of revolutionary optimism and nationalist fervour, but reflecting little of either. In his autobiography, Orozco described this period as 'a time of preparation, during which much trial and error went on and the works produced were purely decorative, with only timid allusions to history, philosophy and other themes'.¹² From the start, the cultural nationalism which was

now becoming more fully synthesized within the work of artists such as Rivera, already at work on his second mural commission in the Ministry of Education building, was viewed by Orozco with great suspicion. 'True nationalism', he wrote

cannot reside in this or that theatrical wardrobe, in this or that folk song of most doubtful worth, but rather in our scientific, industrial, or artistic contribution to civilization at large. For example a painter who works within the Italian tradition of the fifteenth or sixteenth century can be more 'nationalistic' than some other artist tickled silly at the sight of our Mexican pots and pans, which are fit for the kitchen, but not for the drawing room, and even less for the library or laboratory. Such thoughts led me to eschew once and for all the painting of Indian sandals and dirty clothes. From the bottom of my heart I do wish that those who wear them would discard such outfits and get civilized.¹³

True to this view, Orozco's first mural images firmly avoided any hint at indigenous Mexico and its culture.

None of the first murals painted by Orozco remain, with the exception of the panel of *Maternity*. A draft outline of his plan of decoration gives an impression of what he had in mind:

Decoration of the north wall of the courts respectively called the 'Colegio Grande' and 'Pasantes' in the National Preparatory School. General Theme: The Gifts of Nature to Man.

It includes seven secondary themes as follows:

1. Decoration of the door of the hall known as 'El Generalito' and on the left wing of the corridor: *Virginity*, physical integrity and spiritual integrity. Cool harmony, with horizontal and vertical lines predominant; tranquillity, calm. Minor composition: *Adolescence*.
2. Decoration of the central area: *Youth*, allegory of the Sun and a group of schoolgirls; in very warm harmony; lines of movement; large masses very dynamic and ascendant.
3. Decoration of the main door and of the left wall panel: *Grace*. Warm harmony; feminine predominance.
4. Decoration of both sides of the corridor called 'Pasillo': *Beauty*. Warm harmony; masculine predominance.
5. Decoration of the library door: *Intelligence*. Cold and deep harmony.
6. Decoration of the central area of 'Pasantes': *Genius*. Very warm harmony, lines of movement ascending and very dynamic.



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7. Decoration of the right wing: *Force*. Warm harmony. Great dynamic masses. Predominance of horizontal and vertical lines. The decoration has been planned within the same modules and rhythm that characterize the architecture of the building, and in such a way that complete solidarity between both will be achieved. The technique used is classical fresco.¹⁴

Despite the fact that most of the original scheme of this plan was never carried out as described, the draft still reflects the spirit

of Orozco's approach. The photographs of those panels that he did create, together with the one remaining panel of *Maternity*, reveal a synthesis of the styles of Dr. Atl and Michelangelo. As Laurence Hurlbert has noted

The influence of Atl's work and his eloquence for the cause of Michelangelo can be unmistakably seen, if only partially and awkwardly digested, in Orozco's first *Preparatoria* murals, in the superhumanly muscled nudes in 'Youth' . . . and in the colossal figures of 'Tzontemec'

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José Clemente Orozco: *The Destruction of the Old Order*. Fresco, 1926. National Preparatory School, Mexico City.

26
José Clemente Orozco: *The Trench*. Fresco, 1926. National Preparatory School, Mexico City.



imagery in the National Preparatory School in mid-1923, Orozco evolved to create along the walls and inner stairwell of the National Preparatory School a series of monumental, powerful, often tragic images relating to the subject of the revolution, the corruption of justice and the hypocrisy of false moralities, and the spiritual conquest of Mexico by the Spanish. Along the ground-floor patio corridor walls Orozco created his famous depictions of *The Trench*, *The Destruction of the Old Order* and *The Strike*, replacing the early images he had destroyed. Completed in 1926, following a period when his work was unceremoniously interrupted by the hostile reaction to some of his earlier murals, the three huge panels have entered the iconography of Orozco's penetrating vision of human tragedy and pathos. Antonio Rodríguez described the panel of *The Trench* thus:

40 members, around the time of the manifesto's publication he nevertheless clearly identified with the principles of the mural as a public medium. Later, in 1929, he wrote that 'The highest, most logical, purest and most powerful type of painting is mural painting. It is also the most disinterested, as it cannot be converted into an object for personal gain, nor can it be concealed for the benefit of a privileged people. It is for the people. It is for ALL.'²¹

Of the political and social events surrounding the period beginning in late 1923, none caused or explained the dramatic change that occurred in the frescoes of Orozco and Siqueiros, or the less sudden but no less fundamental change in Rivera's work, following their initial incursions into the medium of the public mural. Some of the events predate the changes; some are coincident with them. Certain events, such as the murder of Carrillo Puerto, which seems to have been the inspiration for the final version of Siqueiros' mural *Burial of the Sacrificed Worker* in the Colegio Chico, completed in 1924, relate directly to the change. However, taken together they form a context in which it is possible to see how the philosophical idealism that inspired Vasconcelos' unique educational and cultural project during the presidency of Obregón, together with the aesthetic metaphysics that informed the first mural commissions, collided with, were taken over and subsequently transformed by a political culture created by the revolution. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that the first murals were created in the creed of Vasconcelos. Indeed, by the time of his resignation in July 1924, his attitude towards his progeny had become less than wholehearted in its commitment. For him, the painters 'had got out of hand', as Charlot observed. They had 'refused to work along the line of pure art so fairly offered them . . . instead of lifting the masses to the Pythagorean level of unhampered delectation (they) had dragged painting wilfully down to function as a Newtonian cog'.²² From their hesitant beginnings, the murals now charted a course increasingly derived from the realities and demands of a country whose identity and culture were being reborn from the dynamics of a suppressed history liberated by popular revolt and revolutionary struggle.

The change in Orozco's images was particularly striking. From executing essentially apolitical and metaphysical European





In *The Trench* there are no stirring hymns to drive heroes towards enemy bayonets, no waving standards to enthuse the timid. Here everything is dignified like death or like fire which, having consumed and purified, resolves in ashes . . . two men have fallen, one on his back, the other with hands crossed in front of him, a third kneeling, hides his face in his hand: a rifle lying diagonally, cutting space like a spent bullet. . . . No lyric passion, no lamentation. There is no enthusiasm, nor is there despair.²³

Perhaps more than any of the other frescoes that he created during the 1920s, *The Trench* was the confirmation of what an extraordinary and powerful painter Orozco would turn out to be. Like *The Trench*, the two adjacent panels of *The Strike* and *The Destruction of the Old Order* reveal Orozco as the creator of an eerie stillness, in which the implicit violence of movement is frozen in time by monumentalism. Orozco increasingly

abandoned such stillness in his later murals of the 1930s and 1940s, in which his compositions and painterly style were characterized by violent fractures of compositional structure and gestural paint work.

The earlier panels, which Orozco painted in late 1923 and 1924 along the same stretch of wall, and entitled *The Rich Banquet while the Workers Fight* and *Revolutionary Trinity*, were both the caustic comments of Orozco the caricaturist and the first examples of the tragic pessimism manifested in his work of the 1930s. *The Trinity* was a particularly telling indictment of revolutionary idealism betrayed by its own zeal. The central figure of the panel depicts a revolutionary blinded by the red Jacobin hat of the revolution, brandishing a rifle. The right-hand figure, its hands severed from the wrists, watches helplessly as the figure on the left prays for salvation. Orozco transformed the figures at the sides from their original, more optimistic stance, in which they hold the instruments of measurement, science and calculation, to their present postures of utter despair and helplessness, a telling comment on the development of Orozco's sceptical view of the success of the revolution. This scepticism was expressed more powerfully in his denunciation of false leadership of 1936 in his mural at the University of Guadalajara.

The *Banquet* panel, a monumentalist caricature in which workers fight among themselves to benefit only the rich and the powerful is similar in tone to those images that he created in 1924 along the first-floor corridor walls on the theme of social criticism. Awkward, clumsy and rapidly conceived, these huge, haphazard cartoon-like images provoked enormous criticism, leading Orozco to further bouts of biting satire, no less pictorially successful than those which had provoked the original outcry. The titles of these panels, *Reactionary Forces*, *The Money Box*, *Political Junk Heap*, *Liberty*, *The Last Judgment*, and *Law and Justice*, reflect Orozco's typical penchant for lambast and satire against the pretensions of authority and morality, and his sceptical view on the claims to the ideal made by the world of *realpolitik*. In *Political Junk Heap*, the Jacobin cap with which he blindfolded the central figure in *Revolutionary Trinity* lies among the discarded flotsam of political chicanery, the fasces of Italian fascism, the swastika, crowns etcetera. In other panels, grotesque aristocratic women pass by a begging hand, backs are stabbed,



and hideous male and female figures cavort stupidly with the scales of justice.

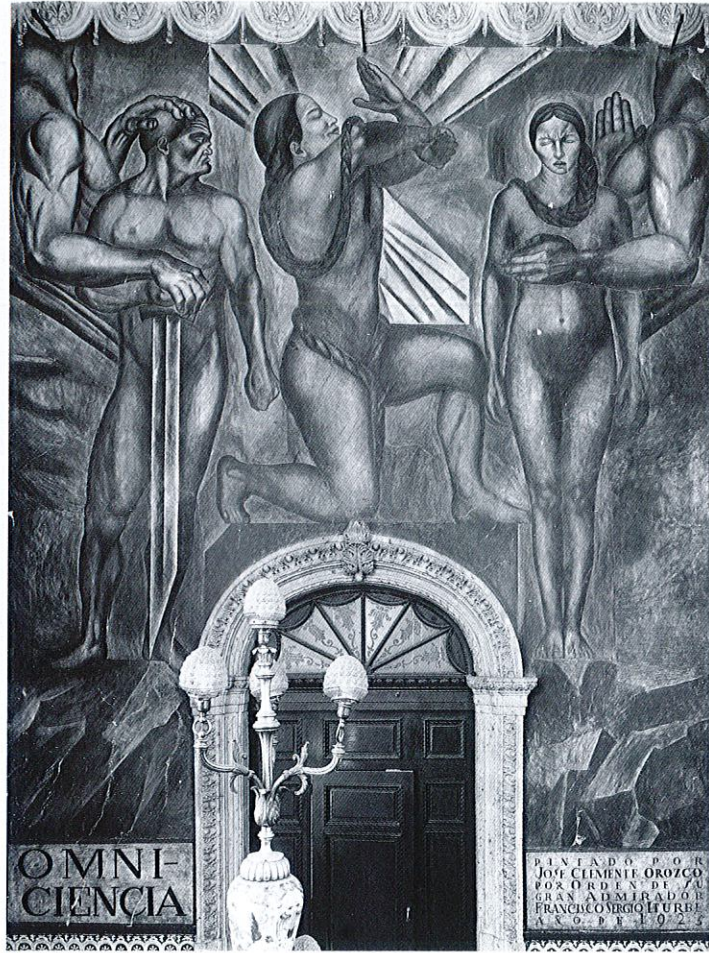
The murals on the first floor together with those created in late 1923 on the ground floor were the target of intense criticism and fury by conservative groups. During de la Huerta's uprising against Obregón, the famous '*Damas Católicas*' and conservative students defaced the murals. Petitions to Vasconcelos protesting against the paintings resulted in Vasconcelos ordering both Orozco and Siqueiros to cease painting. A report in the newspaper *El Excelsior* on 26 June ran the story

Decoration Stopped – Acceding to the terms of a petition presented by students, Sr. José Vasconcelos, Secretary of Public Education, decreed yesterday that the pictorial decoration now in course in the building of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (National Preparatory School), under the supervision of Don Diego Rivera, be stopped.

The Secretary also decreed that one of the painters working under Sr. Rivera be dismissed, when it became known that he had instigated the students to exercise direct action by destroying one of his own pictures.²⁴

Certainly the paintings that Orozco had created were hardly popular. Salvadore Novo described them as 'repulsive pictures, aiming to awaken in the spectator, instead of aesthetic emotions, an anarchistic fury if he is penniless, or if he is wealthy, to make his knees buckle with fright.'²⁵ In *The Plumed Serpent* D. H. Lawrence wrote

They were caricatures so crude and so ugly that Kate was merely repelled. They were meant to be shocking but perhaps the very deliberateness prevents them from being so shocking as they might be. They were ugly and vulgar. Strident caricatures of the Capitalist and the Church, and the Rich Women, and of Mammon, painted life-size and



as violent as possible, round the patios of the grey old building where the young people are educated. To anyone with a spark of human balance they are a misdemeanour.²⁶

Orozco's dismissal from the Preparatoria in June 1924 resulted in an absence from the building of nearly eighteen months. But in 1926 he was recommissioned, this time under the auspices of Alfonso Pruneda, Rector of the National University. In the intervening period, Orozco painted two further murals. The first, entitled *Omniscience*, on the main staircase of the Casa de los Azulejos (House of Tiles) in Mexico City, was a return to the static monumentalism so reminiscent of his first and now destroyed Italianate murals on the ground floor of the National Preparatory School. Even the theme, featuring figures representing inspiration, force and intelligence, was a return to the apolitical; 'a philosophical statement, rather than a revolutionary exhortation or horror scene', as Bernard Meyers described it.²⁷

The second mural of the intervening period was quite different. Painted in 1926, just prior to Orozco's return to the National Preparatory School, in what is now the Workers Education Centre in Orizaba in the state of Veracruz, the fresco *Social*

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José Clemente Orozco: *Omniscience*. Fresco, 1925. Casa de los Azulejos (now Sanborns Restaurant), Mexico City.

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José Clemente Orozco: *Social Revolution*. Fresco, 1926. Industrial School (now the Centre for Workers' Education), Orizaba, Mexico.

Revolution is a dynamic and rhythmic composition depicting revolutionary soldiers as builders of a new society. Below, in a more sombre vein, Orozco depicted what he must have witnessed so often during the revolution when he was stationed in Orizaba with Dr. Atl: the grieving women, the *soldaderas* (girl soldiers) and their children. The images anticipate the series of frescoes he created shortly afterwards along the top floor of the National Preparatory School on the theme of the agrarian revolution.

The frescoes that Orozco painted on his return to the Preparatory School include those on the ground-floor patio passageways, which have already been discussed, those on the stairwell and the cycle on the second floor. The murals that Orozco painted on the stairwell of the school's inner courtyard are particularly significant in that they deal with the theme of the conquest. In one sense, nearly every mural painted by Orozco, Siqueiros and Rivera within Mexico contains and reflects aspects that in some way or another derived from the consequences of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. But Orozco was the first of the three painters directly to hint at the consequences visited on the nation by colonialist intervention. On the walls of the inner stairwell he painted a series of frescoes which includes his celebrated portrayals of *Cortez and Malinche* and *The Franciscan and the Indian*.

The *Cortez and Malinche* fresco was the first direct reference by the Mexican muralists to one of the most significant results of Spanish colonialism in Mexico, that of the miscegenation or *mestizaje* of the indigenous population. The union between the male Spanish European conquistador and his female Indian mistress was an incontestable historical fact. Presented to Cortez by Tabascan chiefs, Malinche was a slave girl, whose knowledge of both the Mexica language and its dialects became a vital asset to Cortez in communicating with the Aztecs. First interpreter, then secretary to Cortez, Malinche became his mistress and bore him a son, Don Martín Cortez.²⁸ In Orozco's portrayal, the couple are joined hand in hand in an act of union. This union, however, is seemingly contingent upon Cortez's subjugation of the Indian, represented in the fresco by a prone and naked figure under the Spaniard's right foot. Cortez's left arm both prevents an act of supplication for the Indian on Malinche's part and acts as a final





separation from her former life. The image of Cortez and Malinche symbolizes synthesis, subjugation and the ambivalence of her position in the story of the nation's history of colonial intervention.

The panel of *The Franciscan and the Indian* is an image equally infused with ambivalence and synthesis by its act of bringing to the metaphorical foreground the consequences of Catholic imperialism in one of its spiritually most effective endeavours. The spiritual 'capture' evoked in the claustrophobic embrace of the naked Indian by the clothed Franciscan, symbol of Spanish Catholicism, is a direct parallel to the physical miscegenation expressed in the image of *Cortez and Malinche*. However, the ambivalence of Orozco's image is expressed here in the implication of salvation and redemption, power and subjugation. It is one that simultaneously summons up the story of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, and the *Requerimiento* (The Summons). The former staunchly defended the Indian, arguing that conversion should be by peaceful means and not demanded as a tribute of conquest.²⁹ The *Requerimiento*, on the other hand, was a statement of principle read to Indians, whose territory was laid claim to by the Conquistadors. It declared Mexico to have been assigned by God to the Catholic kings of Spain, and that reli-



gious men accompanying the army would teach the Catholic religion, which, if it was accepted, would allow the Indians to keep their land subject to the laws of Christianity and the Spanish monarch. Failure to accept, however, would result in war being declared against them.

With these two panels and others in the series entitled *Conqueror Builder* and *The Indian Worker* and *The Old Warrior Racers*, as well as with other images of Franciscans, Orozco placed the conflicting interpretations surrounding the reading of the conquest in the pictorial foreground. Such conflicting readings were characterized by the *Hispanistas* on one side, who saw the Spanish conquest as the freeing of Mexico, representing its absorption into Christendom and therefore civilization, and by the *Indigenistas* on the other, who saw the conquest as nothing more than the genocide and plundering of the native indigenous populations and their rich and ancient cultural traditions. Orozco's views on this dilemma were controversial and often contradictory, but whichever side of the polemic he saw himself on, he seldom waved banners for one side or another.³⁰ Rather, as these fresco images testify, he had an unnerving ability to choose, conceptualize, and express subject matter that lay at the very heart of the conflicting identities of modern Mexico.

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José Clemente Orozco: *Cortez and Malinche*. Fresco, 1926. National Preparatory School, Mexico City.

³²
José Clemente Orozco: *The Franciscan and the Indian*. Fresco, 1926. National Preparatory School, Mexico City.

The final images in the National Preparatory School on the theme of the agrarian revolt which Orozco painted on the second floor express a special pathos. The titles indicate the mood: *The Grave-Digger*, *The Mother's Blessing*, *Return from Work*, *The Mother's Farewell*, *The Family* and *Return to the Battlefields*. In these poetic and tragic images, now sadly in somewhat delapidated condition, Orozco depicted the revolution as a sombre, wearying experience, in which farewells and death itself recur again and again in a constant return to the struggle of battle. The concluding panel, *Return to the Battlefields*, anticipates what would become a leitmotif for Orozco, the idea of struggle as a continuum, a never-ending process of pushing back the tides of oppression only to find them returning to overtake mankind's quest for the ideal, for liberation.

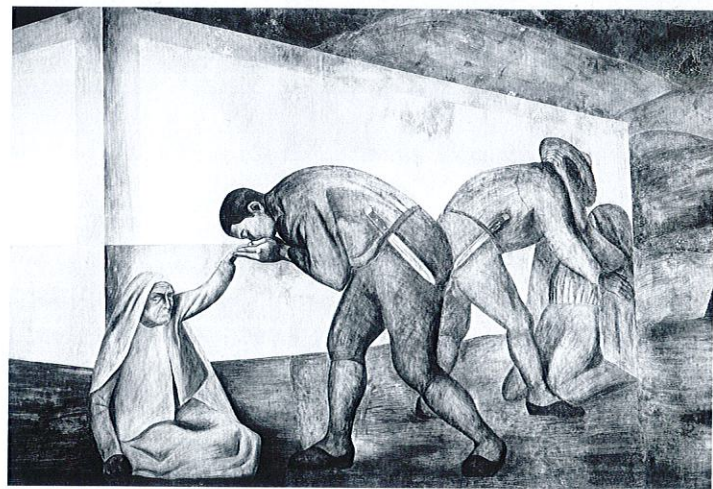
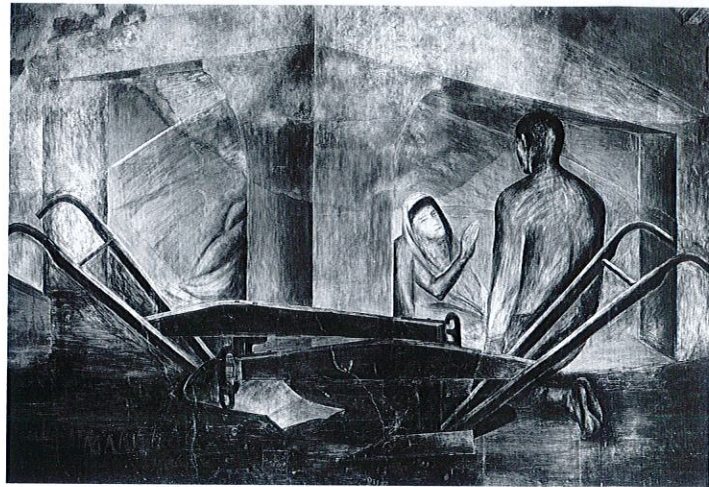
When Orozco completed his frescoes at the National Preparatory School, the reaction to his work was undeservedly negative. Disillusioned, and with the country in the throes of a Catholic-inspired uprising against the anti-clerical laws of President Calles, Orozco left Mexico and went to the United States. Nearly eight years elapsed before he painted another mural in Mexico.

The political events and developments from late 1923 also formed an important context for Siqueiros within which his work changed from his early mural attempts. Undoubtedly Siqueiros' membership of the Mexican Communist Party and his leading role in setting up the mural painters' Syndicate and its newspaper *El Machete* were significant factors in the change.

When Siqueiros began his mural commissions in the Colegio Chico in late 1922, a glaring contrast existed between his publicly professed political preoccupation with an ideological art as reflected in the Syndicate's manifesto and the actual images that he created in the mural panels of both *The Elements* and his collaborative piece *The Myths*.³¹ Two things are clear about this incongruity. First, Siqueiros' political experience had been lived almost exclusively in Mexico. Politically, he was the product of a radical and revolutionary Mexican nationalist experience. His subsequent adoption of the European Marxist tradition added to and even embellished, but did not substitute for, his pre-existing national radicalism. Secondly Siqueiros' artistic education – his absorption of styles, images and ideas on art – was taken, like

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José Clemente Orozco: *The Mother's Blessing*. Fresco, 1926. National Preparatory School, Mexico City.

³⁴
José Clemente Orozco: *The Mother's Farewell*. Fresco, 1926. National Preparatory School, Mexico City.



Rivera's, from European models and sources. Such pictorial sources and influences were added to during his visit to Europe from 1919 to 1921. Although his nationalist leanings helped him identify with Mexico's pre-Columbian heritage, he lacked the maturity to synthesize his largely European artistic experience with his Mexican political experience.

The beginnings of this synthesis began to occur with his panel *Burial of the Sacrificed Worker*. The significance of this work is far greater than is suggested by its awkward and unfinished state, for it marks the point at which Siqueiros consciously



decided to abandon 'symbolic, cosmogenic, sentimental, abstract folkloric terms', as he put it, in order to create works with political and social content. In his memoirs, Siqueiros stated that this was largely the influence of the Syndicate. In reality, the political turmoil that erupted at the end of 1923 with de la Huerta's coup against Obregón was responsible for revealing the disjuncture between Siqueiros' rather tame, apolitical beginnings as a mural painter and the urgency of Mexico's fraught political realities.³² Not only the subject matter of the *Burial* but also the pictorial embellishments to the panel as a whole show how these events acted as a catalyst, transforming the subject matter of Siqueiros' mural work. The embellishments included the painting of an obviously symbolic hammer and sickle on the top side of the coffin, together with Siqueiros' dedication of the panel to the memory of Carrillo Puerto, whose murder was announced shortly after work on the painting was started.³³

In addition, the *Burial of the Sacrificed Worker* expresses an almost religious sentiment. This feature was an aspect shared by

all three muralists at this time. Orozco movingly incorporated religious sentiment in his panel of 1926, *The Trench*, while Rivera created images that were strikingly similar to the religious cycles of Italian renaissance painting many times in his huge cycle in the Ministry of Education. Antonio Rodríguez commented on this important aspect in the early work of the muralists when he wrote that 'Siqueiros merely portrays that attitude of a working class which still has more confidence in the church than in the unions, and still prefers to listen to a sermon rather than a harangue of a leader.'³⁴

Siqueiros' position as a painter on the public payroll came to an end in the middle of 1924. His increasing opposition towards the government, frequently articulated in the pages of *El Machete*, resulted in his dismissal by Vasconcelos' successor as Secretary of Public Education, Puig Cassauranc. Considerably less tolerant of the radicalism of the mural painters than Vasconcelos was even at the end of his term of office, Cassauranc issued an ultimatum to the Syndicate, demanding that either they cease publishing *El Machete*, with its systematic attack on the government, or the

government would suspend all their contracts. Siqueiros' reaction decided the matter: 'If they snatch from us the walls of the public buildings, we have in the pages of *El Machete* movable walls for our great mural painting movement. . . . *El Machete* must be continued and must be continued better in its graphic form . . . we should make an effort to quintuple its production.'³⁵

This reaction, together with Cassauranc's hostility and the public disquiet over many of the murals being painted in the National Preparatory School, resulted in the termination of Siqueiros' contract.³⁶ With the ending of his mural commission in the Colegio Chico, and with no other work available, Siqueiros moved to the city of Guadalajara. Guadalajara was a most appropriate place for him: not only had he begun to formulate the basis of his strategy for a revolutionary art in Mexico there in 1919 in his discussions with the painters of the *Centro Bohemio*, but also by 1924 the governor was Guadalupe Zuño, one of the original members of the *Centro Bohemio*. Zuño was a political radical and decidedly more sympathetic towards the muralists than the central government.

Siqueiros' decision to move to Guadalajara was initially prompted by an invitation from his old friend and fellow *Centro Bohemio* colleague, Amado de la Cueva, to join him on a state mural commission there. De la Cueva had been engaged by Zuño to execute a mural commission in the former chapel of the city university. As an enterprise in collective work, the mural carried out by the two artists is considerably more significant than credited by either Siqueiros or other writers. It was perhaps the first really successful collective mural painting to have been realized in the Mexican mural renaissance. Powerful egos, material difficulties, undisciplined approaches to work and involvement in politics had all previously conspired to prevent the realization of real creative collaboration. In Guadalajara, de la Cueva and Siqueiros managed successfully to synthesize their different styles and approaches. Zuño, in the journal *La Bandera de Provincias*, commented how 'Worthy of praise is the capacity of these two young men at work in mutual coordination, to subject their personal styles to a central formula. . . .'³⁷

Although Siqueiros claimed that he worked for de la Cueva only as a labourer, the pictorial evidence left by the work suggests a much greater creative and collaborative involvement.

This collective achievement has been described as a '... proletarian aesthetic, of epic simplicity, with a pictorial manifesto that avoids facile prettiness and pleasures to express a definite political calling.'³⁸ The themes of this mural are *Work* and *Rebellion*. The subjects of the panels, all painted into the architectural subdivisions of the building, illustrate the revolutionary character of their theme. The subjects in the north part of the building are peasant and agrarian: *Cultivation of the Maize*, *Sugar Cane*, *Agriculture*, and *Unity of the Peasant and the Worker*. At the southern end of the building the images are of industrial workers and their machines: *The Miner*, *The Potter*, *The Electrical Worker*. Over the entrance to the building are panels depicting *The Legend of Zapata* and *The Triumph of the Revolution*.

At first glance it appears that Siqueiros did subordinate all his artistic conceptions to those of de la Cueva, for instead of the spatially dynamic character that he had begun with his panel *Burial of the Sacrificed Worker* in the Colegio Chico, in this joint mural hieratic, solid and immovable images are employed. The monumental figures are silent and at rest. There is no sense of the penetration of pictorial space that he had begun to play with in his *Burial* panel. Instead, a flatly depicted figuration conceived in an overall tonality of reds dominates the whole work, simulating the spirit of a Byzantine church painting in its spatial conventions. Yet even if Siqueiros was at odds with the surface decorativism of de la Cueva's approach, there are nevertheless aspects of the work that are clearly influenced by Siqueiros, connected to developments in his own work at this time. As Zuño observed, 'At first sight one confuses the work done by the two painters, but overall close observation reveals the figures done by Alfaro, angular, reconstructed, more ample than Amado.'³⁹ Indeed the economic monumentality of Siqueiros' figures, as opposed to de la Cueva's more flatly delineated ones, echo not only the figures in the *Burial* panel, but foreshadow the large canvases he painted in Taxco five years later, such as *Peasant Mother* (1929) and *Proletarian Mother* (1930).

An important additional characteristic of this Guadalajara work is its closeness in spirit to the atmosphere of medieval church painting. The work as a whole seems to have been conceived very much in these terms. The simplicity of the whole conception not only achieves a pictorial unity between the two



36
Rivera posing in front of one of his murals at the Ministry of Education, c.1924.

He re-explored this approach some thirty years later with his huge *bas-relief* works on the façade of the Automex factory and the National University in Mexico City.

Further collaboration with de la Cueva was halted when the latter was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident. De la Cueva's untimely death served as a pretext for Siqueiros to break his commitments to Guadalupe Zuño in order to devote himself to full-time political work among the trade unions of Jalisco.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, he had achieved much in artistic terms in the short period between his return to Mexico from Europe in 1922 and his decision to apply himself full-time to political work in 1925. Although the mural work he had created in Mexico City was by no means as impressive as Orozco's or as prolific as Rivera's would be throughout the 1920s, his innumerable writings and manifestos and his ideas on collective work would all be consciously rehearsed in the 1930s, when he would begin to create and develop a political aesthetic for his mural painting that would increasingly be characterized by invention and innovation. He was to develop a thematic approach that would transform the slightly religious aspects of his first murals into a direct assertion of political content reflective of political and urban modernity.

Unlike Orozco and Siqueiros, Rivera weathered the storm of Vasconcelos' resignation and the tide of criticism against the murals which built up towards the end of 1923 and into 1924. He also made his peace with Puig Cassauranc, who not only allowed Rivera to continue with his work in the Ministry of Education building but also seemed keen to encourage him.

By the time *Creation* was completed in April 1923, Rivera had already made a substantial impact. Impressed by his protégé's work, Vasconcelos duly appointed Rivera to the post of Head of the Department of Plastic Crafts at the Ministry of Education. This title was in effect a commission awarded to Rivera to undertake the decoration of Vasconcelos' new Ministry of Education building in the centre of Mexico City. The building, the construction of which sought to give architectural expression to the radical education policies of Vasconcelos, became the site of Rivera's first great achievement as a mural painter.

Although Orozco had created an undeniably powerful and memorable cycle of images in the National Preparatory School

painters of very different artistic temperaments and style, but also visually communicates its theme in a manner seemingly designed for a popular audience. This 'religious' iconographic conception closely reflects the assertions made by Siqueiros as to the collective and communicative power of the early Christian art, an assertion that he had seemed strongly to identify with in his earlier discussions concerning the need to create a revolutionary art for the masses held at the *Centro Bohemio*.

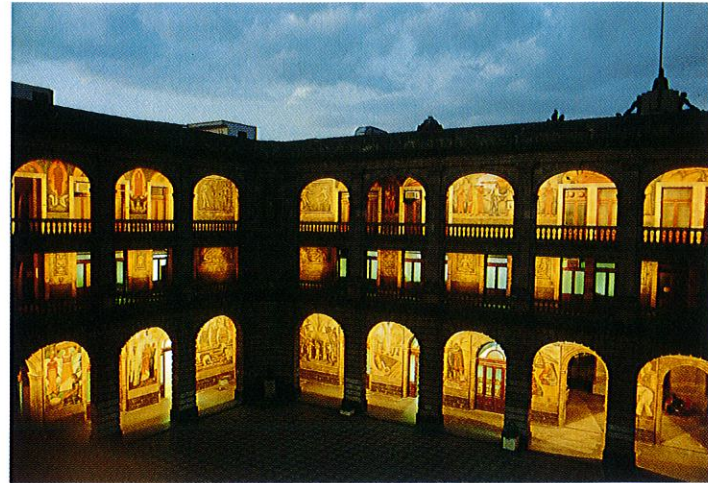
Siqueiros' involvement in this project is reflected in his design and carving of the huge wooden doors to the building. The simple hieratic imagery of the mural inside is echoed in the doors with their organization of rectangular panels depicting revolutionary images of Marx and Lenin, the clasped hands of solidarity and pre-Columbian-type figures. These carved doors are unique in the work of Siqueiros, and are particularly significant because they are a three-dimensional extension of the massive sculptural forms he was beginning to achieve in his paintings.

and Siqueiros' works in the Colegio Chico had begun to hint at future developments, the murals executed by Rivera in the Ministry of Education and in the National Agricultural School at Chapingo between 1923 and 1928 represent the most significant stage in the development of the Mexican mural movement as a radical national public art. His work at the Ministry signified his move away from the exclusivity of his largely European educational past and experience, which until then had for the most part inhibited the full expression of the social and political reality of Mexico in his work. In the murals at the Ministry, the concept underlying post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism – the idea that the nation's culture was both the product and the possession of the people – became part of Rivera's political and visual aesthetic. This in turn stimulated much worldwide interest in the development of Mexican mural painting in the 1920s.

The populist dimensions of Rivera's Ministry of Education murals were rooted in the same circumstances as those which effected the changes in Orozco and Siqueiros' work at the National Preparatory School, that is, the radical atmosphere surrounding the Obregón government at the end of 1923. Constantly pressurized by the strength of the country's growing labour movement, the Government tended to side with the forces of the left. Plutarco Calles, Minister of the Interior and in 1924 successor to Obregón as President, declared that 'the people's wishes can no longer be silenced by gunfire . . . it is the unavoidable duty of rulers to respect and guarantee the free exercise of rights – such as the right to strike – to all citizens.'⁴¹

Although Rivera was often the target of the violent verbal attacks against the murals after Vasconcelos had resigned, paradoxically his murals remained unscathed, leaving him free to carry on working and to consolidate his position as the leading painter in the movement. Against this background, together with the formation of the painters' Syndicate by Rivera, Siqueiros and Guerrero, and their collective membership of the Mexican Communist Party, Rivera's adherence to socialist politics took on a very public display, and became steadily infused into the visual and thematic texture of the murals he painted.

By the time Rivera completed his work at the ministry in 1928, he and his assistants had painted 235 individual fresco panels, of



which 116 were principal works. Together they covered an area of 15,000 square feet. In his book *My Life, My Art*, Rivera wrote that it was his aim 'to reflect the social life of Mexico as I saw it, and through my vision of the truth to show the masses the outline of the future.'⁴²

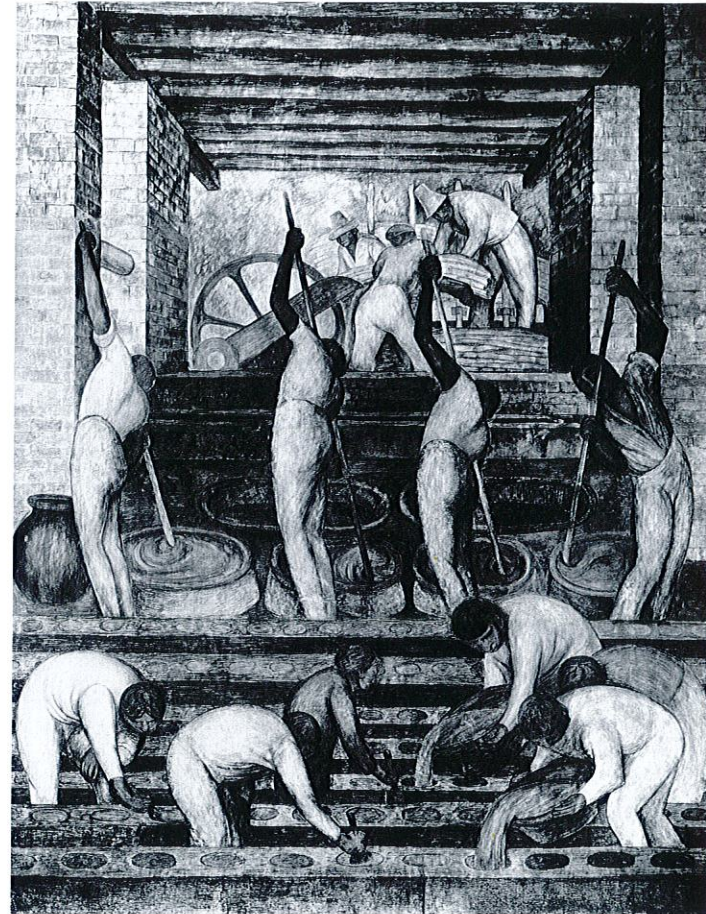
The murals are divided according to the architectural subdivision of the building. Based on the colonial model, it was designed with two adjacent courtyards, each with two floors. On the ground floor of the first courtyard, which he entitled 'The Courtyard of Labour', Rivera painted images depicting themes of labour characteristic of the different geographical regions of Mexico. On the first floor are smaller images, mostly monochromatic, symbolizing intellectual labour such as medicine and technology. The second floor shows images symbolizing the arts and sciences, together with the great heroes of the revolution.

In the second courtyard, which Rivera called 'The Courtyard of the Fiestas', he painted frescoes on the themes of Mexican traditions of popular religious and political festivals. On the first floor, painted almost exclusively by his assistants, Rivera designed escutcheons for the different Mexican states, while on the top floor he executed murals illustrating the famous *Corridos* of the *Agrarian and Proletarian Revolutions*. In addition to these, Rivera also painted views of the Mexican landscape on the stairwell of the Labour Courtyard, representing the evolution of the country's political and social life.

Diego Rivera: *The Dyers*. Fresco, 1923. North wall, Court of Labour, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

Diego Rivera: *The Sugar Refinery*. Fresco, 1923. North wall, Court of Labour, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

Diego Rivera: *The Embrace*. Fresco, 1923. East wall, Court of Labour, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.



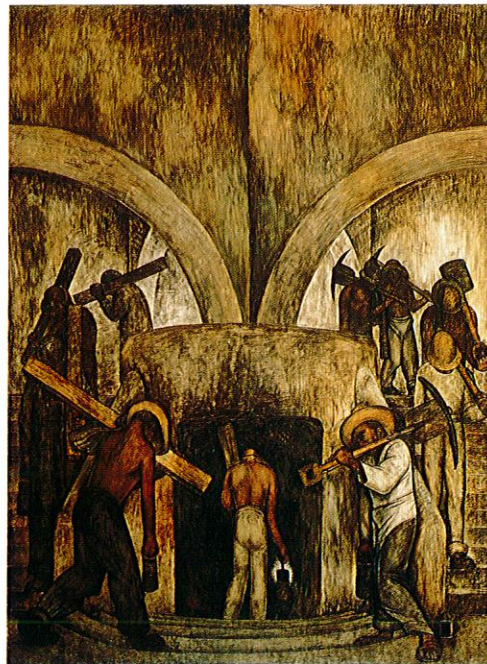
Rivera began his cycle on the ground floor of the Labour Courtyard.⁴³ Rivera developed his own highly individual manner of social expression here in the eighteen principal fresco panels depicting the industries and agriculture of the different regions of Mexico. The influence of his 1922 visit to Tehuantepec remained with him in the first images he executed. Along the north wall and in the small vestibule of this part of the courtyard he painted *The Dyers* and a series of frescoes on the theme of *The Tehuanas*, showing the industries of the southern, largely Indian region of Mexico. The atmosphere, the colour and the generally decorative tone of these panels celebrate the indigenous culture, reflecting the climate of cultural *indigenismo* at the time.⁴⁴



41
Diego Rivera: *Entry into the Mine*.
Fresco, 1923. East wall, Court of
Labour, Ministry of Education,
Mexico City.

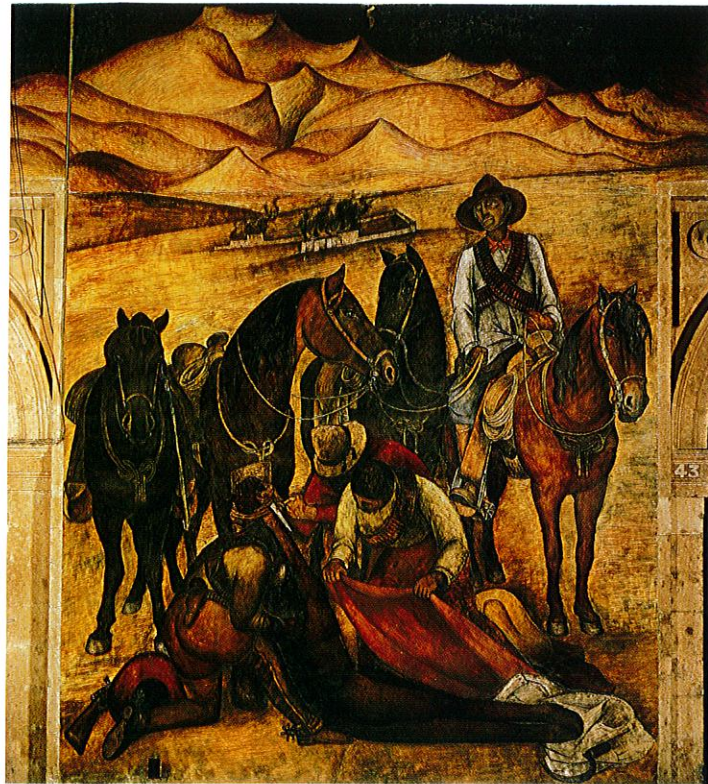
42
Diego Rivera: *Exit from the Mine*.
Fresco, 1923. East wall, Court of
Labour, Ministry of Education,
Mexico City.

54 After the decorative and rather exotic panels of *The Tehuanas*, Rivera began to introduce a quite different character. In such panels as *The Sugar Refinery* and in a further series of panels on the south wall depicting the iron and surface mining industries of northern Mexico, his frescoes became more rhythmical, monumental and much less folkloric. Rivera avoided the use of visual rhetoric in these images of industrial labour to express the toil and hardship that the workers endured. Along the east wall, Rivera went so far as to express a political identification with his subject matter. Here, in images depicting the agriculture and mining and pottery industries of western Mexico, he synthesized his national subject matter with his knowledge of Italian renaissance religious painting to create extraordinary images full of pathos and tragedy. His approach draws heavily on the moving spirituality of Christian Mexico. In the panel *Entry into the Mine*, the miners carrying pickaxes, shovels and pit props over their



shoulders echo the Biblical story of the road to Calvary. In the adjacent panel, *Exit from the Mine*, the crucified stance of the miner being searched by a mine official evokes the Crucifixion sacrifice.⁴⁵ Further along the wall, in the panel *The Embrace*, the unity expressed in the embrace of the peasant and industrial worker, with the peasant's sombrero resembling a halo and his serape a religious cloak, conveys all the religious passion of a secular annunciation, visiting the two figures in a spirit of human brotherhood. The fusion in these images of the labour, exploitation and solidarity of the Mexican worker with allusions to the passion of Christ represents one of the most striking and poetic elements in Rivera's artistic vocabulary.

43
Diego Rivera: *The Liberation of the Peon*. Fresco, 1923. South wall, Court of Labour, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.



Rivera continued to use images alluding to the Passion in his fresco *The Liberation of the Peon*. Here, the allusion is to the descent from the cross and the lamentation, which Rivera employed to express the tragic freedom of death when the peasant is finally released from his life of drudgery and exploitation. By contrast, an adjacent panel entitled *The New School* expresses the notion of a different kind of freedom, gained through revolution. *The New School* openly alludes to the rural schools created by Vasconcelos in his drive to bring literacy to the countryside.

Apart from the very first frescoes which he painted on the north wall, Rivera had depicted the life of the Mexican worker as one of toil. As he moved into the second courtyard, the 'Court-yard of the Fiestas', his mood changed. He described the atmosphere expressed here as one in which 'the people turned from

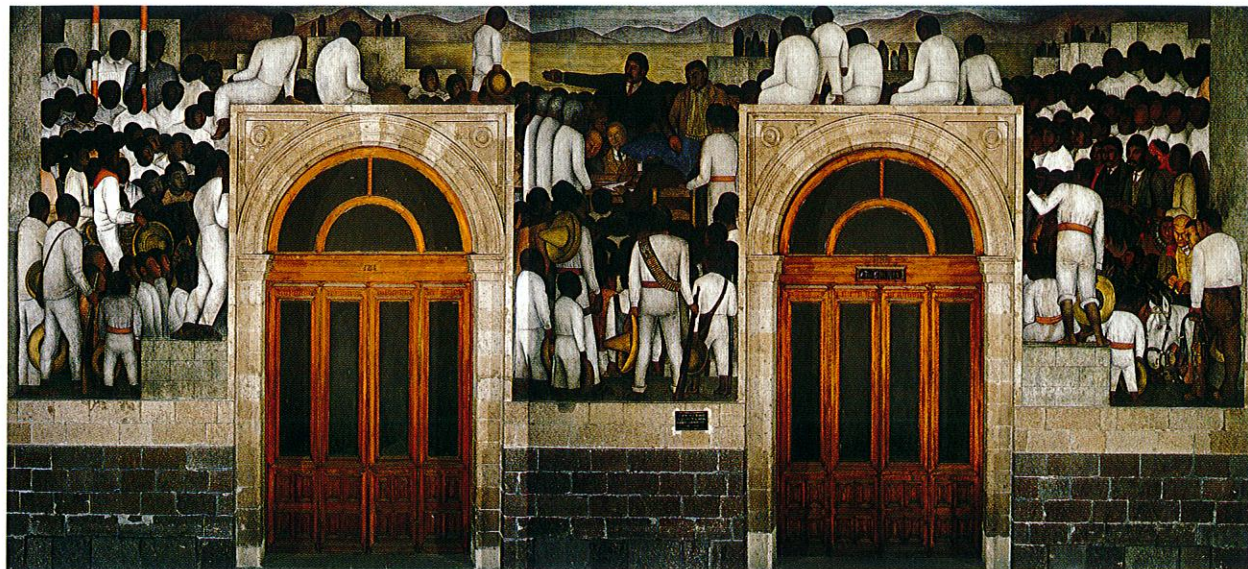
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Diego Rivera: *The New School*. Fresco, 1923. South wall, Court of Labour, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

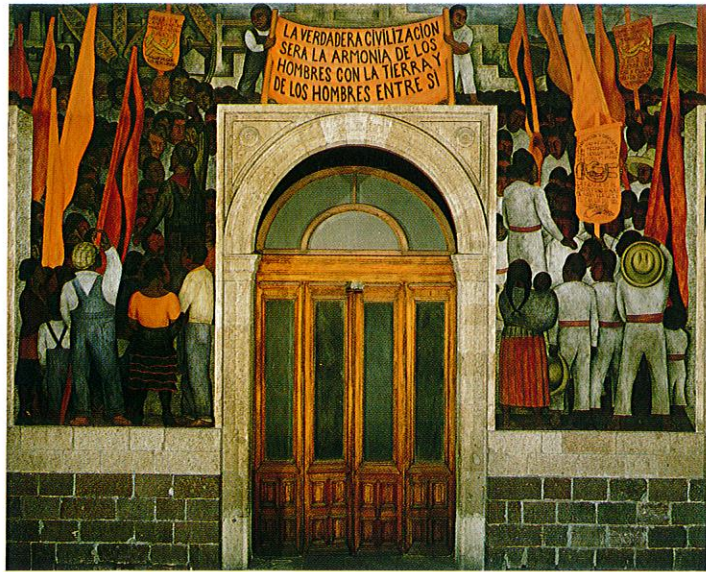


their exhausting labors to their creative life, their joyful weddings, and their lively fiestas: The Burning of the Judases, The Dance of the Deer, The Dance of the Tihuanas, The Dance of the Ribbons, The Corn Harvest Dance'.⁴⁶ Rivera's murals in the second courtyard mark both the point at which a certain distance and even antagonism began to occur between himself and the other mural painters, and the development of his position as the movement's leading figure. To some extent this distancing was illustrated by his treatment of fellow artists. While working as assistants on the first courtyard, de la Cueva, Guerrero and Charlot had also been given the task of decorating some areas of the second. This reflected the ethos of the Syndicate, which aimed to share out work collectively. However, in his capacity as Head of the Department of Plastic Crafts at the Ministry of Education, Rivera found the efforts of his fellow painters

45
Diego Rivera: *The Festival of the
Distribution of the Land*. Fresco,
1923-4. South wall, Court of the
Fiestas, Ministry of Education,
Mexico City.

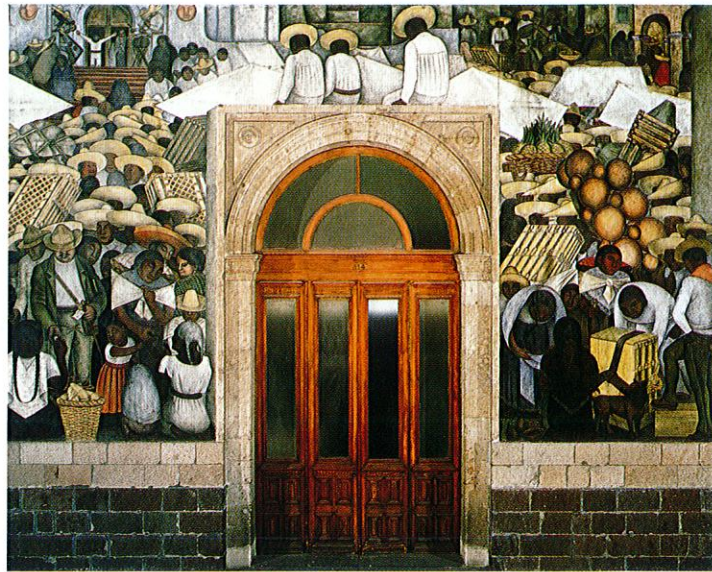
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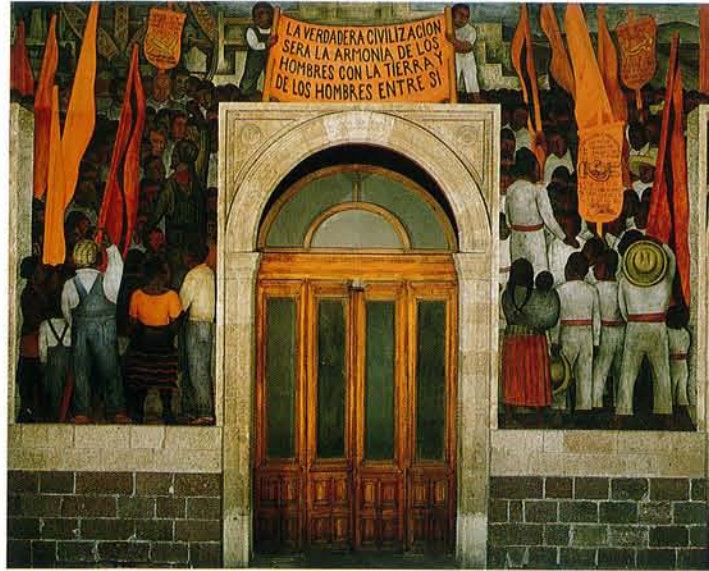
unsatisfactory. Complaining that their work was technically inadequate and would not integrate with his own scheme, he summarily dismissed them and assigned them the menial task of painting the escutcheons on the floor above. Furthermore, when he finally entered the second courtyard to start his own painting, Rivera decided to chip from the wall two of Guerrero's frescoes and one of Charlot's on the grounds that they interfered with his own plans.⁴⁷ In addition to this, Rivera's support for his fellow colleagues in the Syndicate was less than forthright when their murals were being attacked at the National Preparatory School. He dismissed the attacks as a tiny scandal. On 11 September 1924 *El Machete* announced: 'Diego Rivera resigned from the Syndicate of Painters and Sculptors in July because of a difference of opinion concerning a majority decision relating to the protest made public at the time against the destruction of mural paintings at the National Preparatory School.' Whereas Siqueiros and Orozco were dismissed from their work at the School, Rivera was able to continue working, enjoying the support of Vasconcelos' successor, Puig Cassauranc.

Although Rivera adopted the same layout in the Fiesta Courtyard as he had employed in the Labour Courtyard, dividing his themes geographically in accordance with the direction each wall



faced, his compositional style was markedly different. In the Labour Courtyard, his compositions had tended to be grand, sometimes monumental, employing only a few figures. In the Fiesta Courtyard, on every available wall space, between the entrances to the offices, even over the doorways, Rivera painted hundreds of figures, as though he was creating a vast portrait of the Mexican people.

This and the general air of celebration that permeates the twenty-four principal frescoes of the second courtyard is typified in the middle sections of each of its three walls. Here, Rivera painted *The Festival of the Distribution of the Land*, *The Festival of the First of May* and *The Market*. In the first two, Rivera expressed decidedly political themes. However, his tone here was not critical, as it was in the Labour Courtyard, where his images by implication seemed set in pre-revolutionary Mexico. Instead, the murals exude an air of revolutionary optimism and idealism, creating visual eulogies to the gains of the revolution with its new atmosphere of political liberation. The compositions are made up of compacted groups of predominantly Indian figures and seem to represent Rivera's attempts to give expression to what he saw as an authentic, indigenous national image. This idea is underpinned by the way in which Rivera constructed the

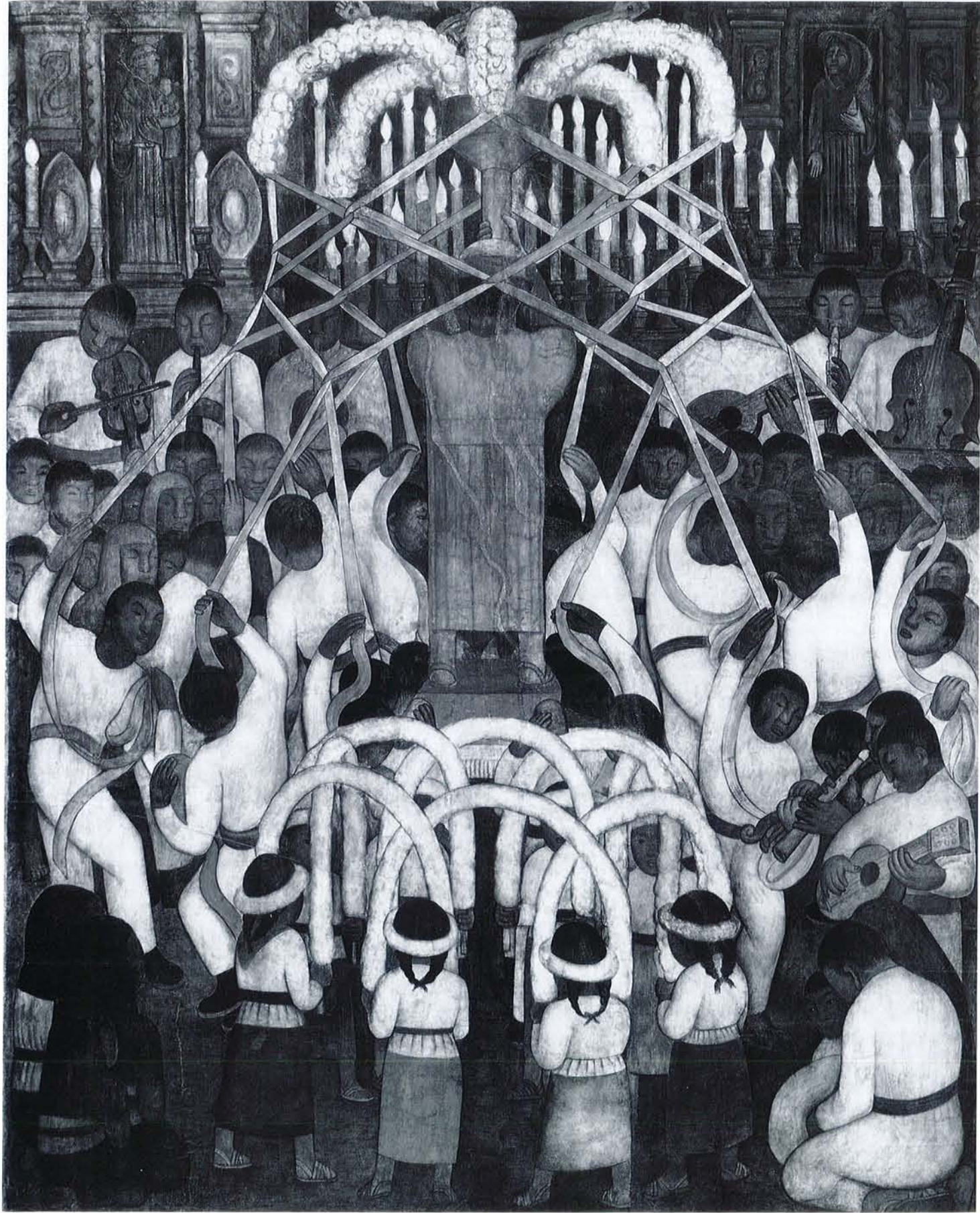


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compositions: lack of background space, together with a tiered arrangement of figures echoing the pictorial method of the Aztecs and Mayans before the conquest.⁴⁸

The reverence with which Rivera depicted the Indian and the peasant can be clearly seen in the three panels with the theme of the Day of the Dead. In the panel depicting the festival in its urban setting, *The Day of the Dead – City Fiesta*, Rivera treated his subject satirically, depicting it essentially as a raucous, even drunken celebration. In its rural setting, entitled *The Day of the Dead – The Offering*, the peasants celebrate the festival in traditional manner, with prayers and offerings of food at the graveside. Similarly, *The Day of the Dead – The Dinner* is a quiet yet unmistakable eulogy to peasant life.

Rivera continued the spirit of comment and satire in an adjacent panel entitled *The Burning of the Judases*. From the early 1900s, this festival had become an occasion at which effigies of unpopular political figures were stuffed with explosives and set alight. In Rivera's mural, three exploding puppets, representing the politician, the church and the army sway above a mass of gyrating figures. This trilogy of Judases symbolizes the pre-revolutionary institutional oligarchies' betrayal of Mexico and its people.

However, Rivera's use of satire and political critique is rare in the ground floor murals in the Fiesta Courtyard, for his enduring theme is the celebration of the life and traditions of the Indian peasant. The frescoes showing these traditional customs and festivals, such as *The Deer Dance*, *The Corn Festival*, *The Ribbon Dance* and *La Zandunga* are particularly intriguing in this respect, since they focus on the image of the Indians, presenting them as the quintessence of the real Mexico.⁴⁹

He continued his decoration of the Ministry with the cycle of murals painted in the stairwell adjacent to the Courtyard of Labour. From the ground up to the second floor, Rivera presented what he described as

an interpretative painting of the Mexican landscape rising from the sea to hills and plateaus and mountain peaks. Alongside this representation of the ascending landscape was an accompanying view of the progress of man. Allegorical figures personified the ascending stages of the social evolution of the country from primitive society through the peoples' revolution to the liberated and fulfilled social order of the future.⁵⁰







61

51 *opposite top*
Diego Rivera: *The Burial of the Revolutionary*. Fresco, 1926. North wall stairwell, Court of Labour, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

52 *opposite bottom*
Diego Rivera: *Tropical Mexico and Xochipilli and his Votaries*. Fresco, 1926. North wall stairwell, Court of Labour, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

53 *above*
Diego Rivera: *The Mechanization of the Country*. Fresco, 1926. North wall stairwell, Court of Labour, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

In contrast to the exotic and somewhat idealized representation of southern Mexico on the lower levels of the stairs, Rivera painted scenes of Mexico's agricultural centre and north on the top floor of the stairwell. This is the Mexico of the hacienda, of the landlord, of exploitation and revolution. On one wall, in a panel entitled *The Mechanization of the Country*, a goddess-like figure swathed in red strikes down the landlord and his cohorts with a triple-headed lightning bolt. In *The Burial of the Revolutionary* on the adjoining wall, Rivera presented one of his most moving and significant themes: heroic sacrifice in the revolutionary struggle. The image highlights the synthesis of European religious painting with Mexican reality. The references to Giotto's *Lamentation* at the Arena Chapel in Padua (1305–08) and perhaps more significantly to El Greco's painting of *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1586; Santo Tomé, Toledo), which Rivera had seen during his travels in Spain, are unmistakable.⁵¹



54
 Diego Rivera: *Wall Street Banquet*.
 Fresco, 1928. North wall, Courtyard
 of the Fiestas, Ministry of
 Education, Mexico City.

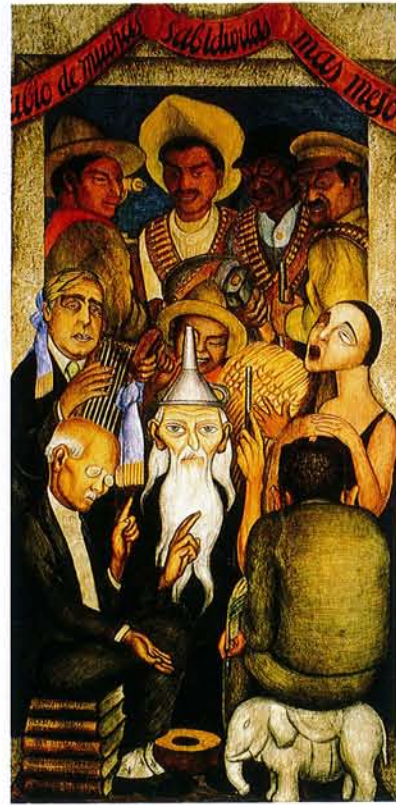
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Diego Rivera: *Our Bread*. Fresco,
1928. South wall, Courtyard of the
Fiestas, Ministry of Education,
Mexico City.



56
Diego Rivera: *Night of the Poor*.
Fresco, 1928. North wall, Courtyard
of the Fiestas, Ministry of
Education, Mexico City.



57
Diego Rivera: *The Learned*. Fresco,
1928. North wall, Courtyard of the
Fiestas, Ministry of Education,
Mexico City.



63

The final frescoes in the Ministry of Education, along the corridors of the second floor of the Courtyard of the Fiestas, include twenty-six panels illustrating the stanzas from three revolutionary *corridos* or popular songs: *The Ballad of Zapata*, *The 1910 Mexican Agrarian Revolution*, which was written by José Guerrero, and *Así Será La Revolución Proletaria* (That is How the Proletarian Revolution Will Be), written by Martínez.⁵² Although the two agrarian *corridos* frescoes were painted nearly two years before the proletarian *corrido*, which Rivera completed following his trip to the Soviet Union in 1928, all the illustrations are characterized by a recurring *motif*: the contrast between a eulogy of the revolution, its ideals and achievements, and biting criticism of its opponents and detractors.⁵³ In the three panels illustrating the theme of the supper, Rivera contrasts the

plutocracy with the popular masses. In the *Wall Street Banquet*, he painted a group of American industrialists and their wives seated at a dinner table examining the gold ticker-tape of the stock exchange. Among the assembled figures are recognizable caricatures of John D. Rockefeller (top left of the table), J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford. In the panel entitled *Capitalist Dinner*, Rivera continues his satire of the rich's obsession with money by picturing those assembled around the table staring at dinner plates full of coins, and sporting expressions of infinite stupidity. In contrast to both these panels, *Our Bread*, illustrating the theme of the proletarian or revolutionary supper, is strongly eulogistic, and alludes to the Christian miracle epitomized in the figure of the revolutionary at the head of the table breaking bread.



58
 Diego Rivera: *Night of the Rich*.
 Fresco, 1928. North wall, Courtyard
 of the Fiestas, Ministry of
 Education, Mexico City.

59
Diego Rivera: *Death of a Capitalist*.
Fresco, 1928. South wall, Courtyard
of the Fiestas, Ministry of
Education, Mexico City.



60
Diego Rivera: *He Who Wants to Eat Must Work*. Fresco, 1928. South wall, Courtyard of the Fiestas, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

61
Diego Rivera: *The Trench*. Fresco, 1928. South wall, Courtyard of the Fiestas, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

62. below
Diego Rivera: *The Protest*. Fresco, 1928. West wall, Courtyard of the Fiestas, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

63. opposite
Diego Rivera: *Distribution of the Arms*. Fresco, 1928. South wall, Courtyard of the Fiestas, Ministry of Education, Mexico City.

66



Rivera continued this theme of contrasts with two further panels called *Night of the Rich* and *Night of the Poor*. He indulged in one of his most biting satires in the panel of *The Learned*, picturing a group of bourgeois intellectuals among whom Rivera depicted none other than José Vasconcelos (with his back to the viewer), the one man who above all else had been responsible for bringing into being the Mexican mural movement, in which Rivera was now playing the leading role. However, in the wake of the failed de la Huerta coup, Vasconcelos was now viewed as an increasingly conservative figure, publicly disenchanted with the revolutionary murals which his original patronage had inspired. Vasconcelos now criticized the mural artists for having fallen 'into the abjection of covering walls with portraits of criminals'.⁵⁴

Rivera focused on the theme of revolutionary justice in the *Corrido of the Proletarian Revolution* with panels that included *He Who Wants to Eat Must Work* and *Death of a Capitalist*. He contrasted these with utopian, highly idealized visions of revolutionary struggle and achievement in such panels as *The Trench*, *Distribution of the Arms*, *To Work*, *The Protest*, *Learning the ABC*, *The Cooperative* and *United Front*.⁵⁵

By the time Rivera completed his vast cycle of frescoes at the Ministry of Education in 1928 he had created an epic portrait of the Mexican people. Notwithstanding accusations that he had indulged in the falsification of reality in his eulogistic depictions of the revolution's achievements, Rivera acknowledged in his *Corrido* illustrations the great debt he owed to Posada. He had created a pictorial synthesis of the rich traditions of Mexican



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popular culture from Posada's ballads of hope and love and his popular images of satire and social criticism. Rivera also consolidated his style and narrative purpose in the cycle, both of which he went on to develop further in his later work and which profoundly influenced many North American artists during the 1930s, who saw Rivera's public murals as breaking down the barriers separating art from propaganda.

If Rivera's frescoes at the Ministry of Education represent an extensive social and political panorama of the Mexican people, then the cycle of murals he painted in the chapel and administrative building at the National Agricultural School at Chapingo in the state of Mexico in 1925–26 represents a particular aspect of that panorama, that of Mexico's agrarian revolution.

The agrarian revolution and the issue of land reform and

ownership was central to the character of Mexico's 1910 revolution. As a subject it thus had particular resonance and significance. For Rivera the theme of the land also represented a link to the historical, cultural and political origins of the Mexican Indian and peasant, whom he had depicted with increasing frequency in the Labour and Fiesta Courtyards of the Ministry of Education as the personification of the true nature of Mexican identity.

The land and buildings of Chapingo, situated just outside Mexico City, were owned by a former president of Mexico and were nationalized after the revolution and turned into an agricultural school. Using the theme of the land, Rivera based his cycle on Emiliano Zapata's dictum 'Here it is taught to exploit the land not the man'.



64 above
Diego Rivera: *Alliance of the Peasant and the Industrial Worker*. Fresco, 1924. North wall, second floor foyer, administrative building, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.

65 opposite
Diego Rivera: *Partition of the Land*. Fresco, 1924. Second floor foyer, administrative building, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.

The frescoes begin in the entrance to the building at the foot of the main staircase, with images depicting the *Men and Women of Tehuantepec*. These figures are reminiscent of those Rivera had used two years earlier in the Courtyard of Labour at the beginning of his cycle in the Ministry of Education. In the body of the stairwell, he painted scenes of cultivation and harvest in monochrome, while on the first floor, on either side of the staircase are panels representing good and bad government. The panel of *Bad Government* illustrates scenes of the cruel excesses of pre-revolutionary Mexico, with peasants shown being horsewhipped and lynched. *Good Government* is a contrasting image of the land in which abundance and cultivation are reality. Scenes of construction and education and the dual



portraits of President Obregón and de Negri, Secretary of Agriculture under Obregón, make this an unmistakable eulogy to the ideals and achievements of the revolution.⁵⁶ In the two panels facing each other at the head of the stairs, *The Alliance of the Peasant and Industrial Worker* and *The Partition of the Land*, Rivera closely echoed the format of frescoes that he had painted with similar titles and themes in the Courtyard of the Fiestas at the Ministry of Education.

Rivera achieved his most explicit and poetic expression of the agrarian theme in the chapel itself when he returned to it in 1926. The decorative scheme of the chapel has both paradox and irony: on the one hand, it is a visual 'shrine' to the materialist philosophy and politics of revolution and to the earth's

fecundity, yet on the other, the images evoke an essentially Biblical atmosphere. In part, this association is made apparent by the architecture of the chapel, to which Rivera faithfully adhered in planning the location and form of the murals. Simultaneously some of the imagery also evokes a Biblical atmosphere, through its reference to some of the great works of Italian renaissance painting. The choice of colour, with its deep golden hues and earth tones, echoes the atmosphere of mediaeval church painting.

At one level, the decoration of the chapel of Chapingo can be seen as a hymn to the earth. However the narrative is quite didactic. The spirit of the work is movingly expressed on a panel within the chapel in an inscription which reads

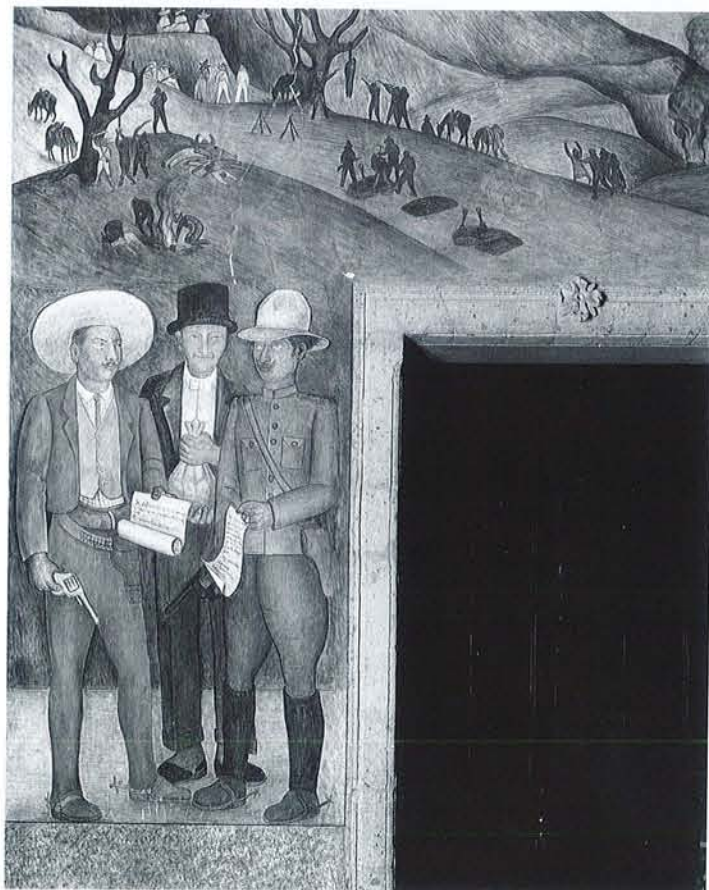
66 top left
Diego Rivera: *Men and Women of Tehuantepec under Wind and Cloud Symbols*. Fresco, 1924. East wall entrance, administrative building, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.



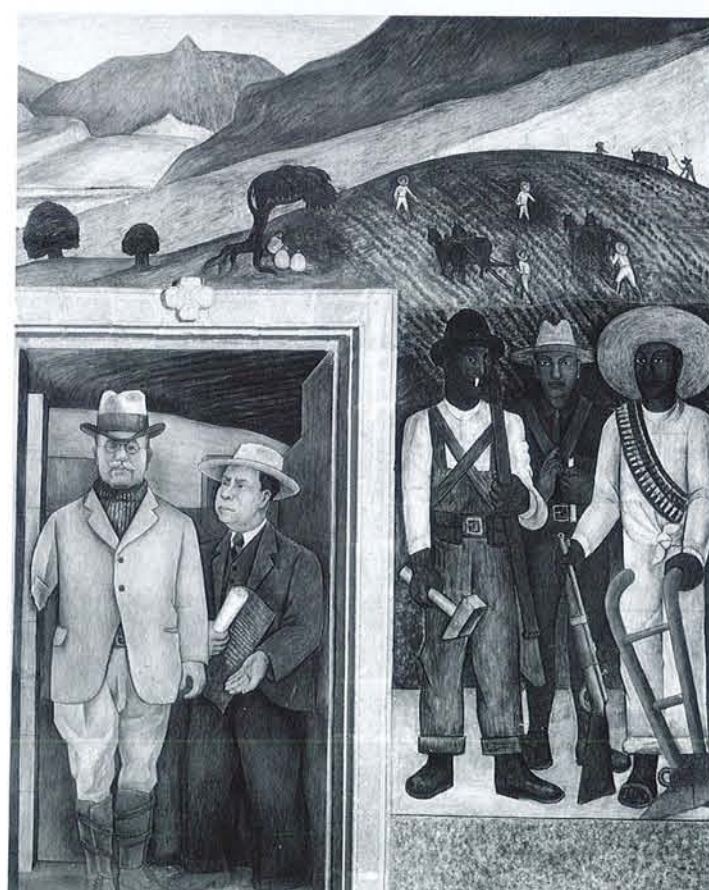
67 top right
Diego Rivera: *Men and Women of Tehuantepec in Mountain Landscape with Sunburst*. Fresco, 1924. Entrance, administrative area, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.



68 bottom left
Diego Rivera: *Bad Government*. Fresco, 1924. North wall, second floor foyer, administrative building, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.



69 bottom right
Diego Rivera: *Good Government*. Fresco, 1924. South wall, second floor foyer, administrative building, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.





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To all those who fell and to the thousands who will yet fall in the fight for the land and to all those who make it fruitful by the labour of their hands. Earth manured with blood, bones and flesh! To commemorate all those who sacrificed themselves to it. This work is dedicated to them by all those who took part in it: Juan Rojano, Efigenio Tezlez, stonemasons, Ramón Alva Guadarrama, Maximo Pacheco and Pablo O'Higgins, assistants, and Diego Rivera painter.⁵⁷

The left-hand side of the chapel contains a series of fresco panels depicting the revolutionary transformation of the ownership of the land. On the right-hand side of the chapel and acting as a thematic mirror to the images, Rivera presents the biological and geological evolutionary cycles of the earth. The social and political revolution is therefore presented as the counterpart to the process of the natural evolution of the earth.

The theme of the political and revolutionary transformation of the ownership of land is introduced by Rivera in two panels at either side of the chapel entrance. On the left is a didactic panel entitled *The Agitator*, while on the right is a moving image entitled *The Blood of the Revolutionary Martyrs Fertilizing the Earth* depicting the two martyred heroes of the agrarian revolution, Zapata and Montaño. The juxtaposition within the second panel of Zapata and Montaño's death with the abundant harvest of maize that



70 top
Diego Rivera: *The Blood of the Revolutionary Martyrs Fertilizing the Earth*. Fresco, 1926. Chapel, east wall, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.

71 & 72 above and overleaf
Diego Rivera: *The Agitator*. Fresco, 1926. Chapel, west wall, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.







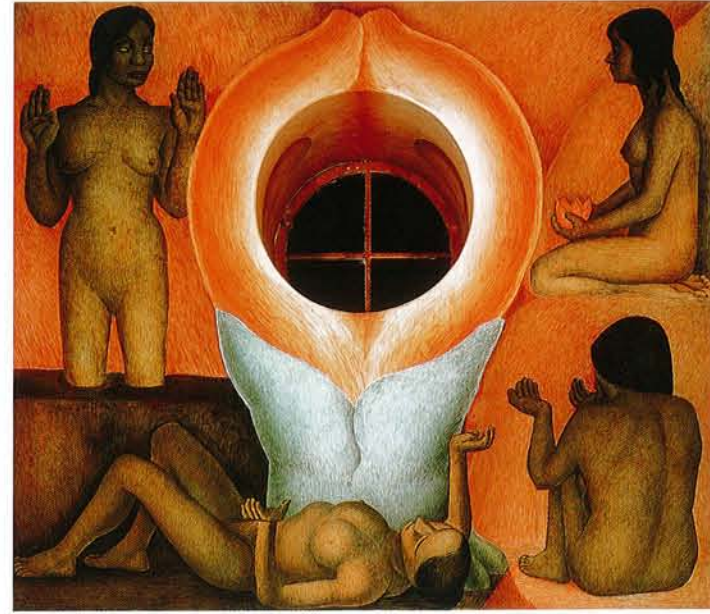
73 *opposite top*
Diego Rivera: *The Exploiters*. Fresco,
1926. Chapel, west wall,
Autonomous University of
Chapingo, Mexico.

74 *opposite bottom*
Diego Rivera: *Subterranean Forces*.
Fresco, 1926. Chapel, east wall,
Autonomous University of
Chapingo, Mexico.

75 *below*
Diego Rivera: *The Earth Enslaved*.
Fresco, 1926. Chapel, upper west
wall, Autonomous University of
Chapingo, Mexico.

76 *above*
Diego Rivera: *The Flowering*. Fresco,
1926. Chapel, east wall,
Autonomous University of
Chapingo, Mexico.

77 *below*
Diego Rivera: *Germination*. Fresco,
1926. Chapel, east wall,
Autonomous University of
Chapingo, Mexico.

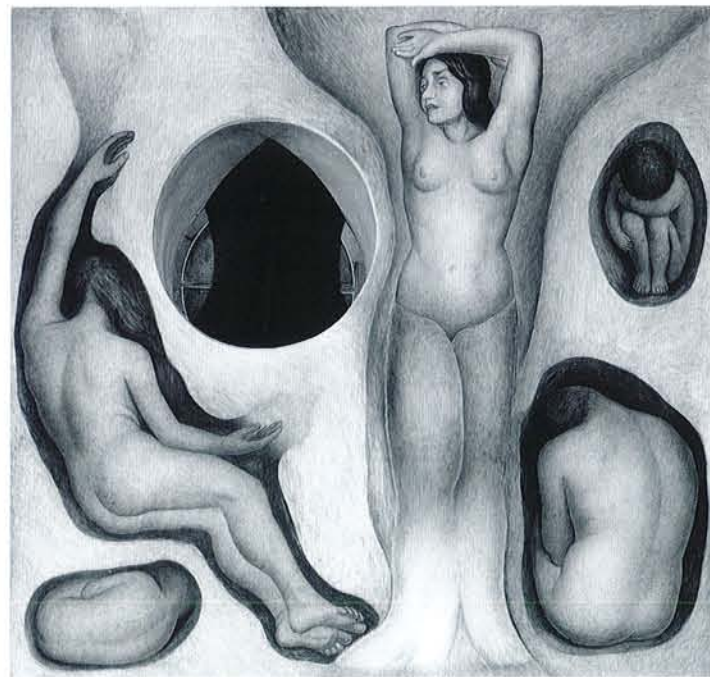


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grows above them introduces the dualities of life and death and of social revolution and natural evolution, both of which are at the heart of the cycle in the rest of the chapel.

Within the main body of the chapel the duality begins with a theme of Biblical chaos. The panel of *The Exploiters* on the left-hand side, and that directly above it, *The Earth Enslaved*, depict the land and the worker in the grip of vicious dictators and greedy landlords. In the upper panel Rivera ingeniously suggests that the image of the seated nude is a representation of the Mexican nation, for her body outline closely resembles that of Mexico itself. She is depicted surrounded by tormentors, represented by three grotesque figures symbolizing the church, the army and capitalism.⁵⁸ On the opposite side of the aisle, the theme of natural evolution begins with the panel *Subterranean Forces* in which anthropomorphic female figures swim up through the chaos of the earth's fire.

Further along the aisle, the two panels of *Germination* and *The Flowering* are mirrored on the opposite wall by those of *The Formation of the Revolutionary Leadership* and *The Blood of the Martyrs*. Here Rivera returns to his theme of sacrifice (death) for the revolution, this time expressing it as a process of perpetual contribution and renewal. As in his panel *Burial of a Revolutionary*





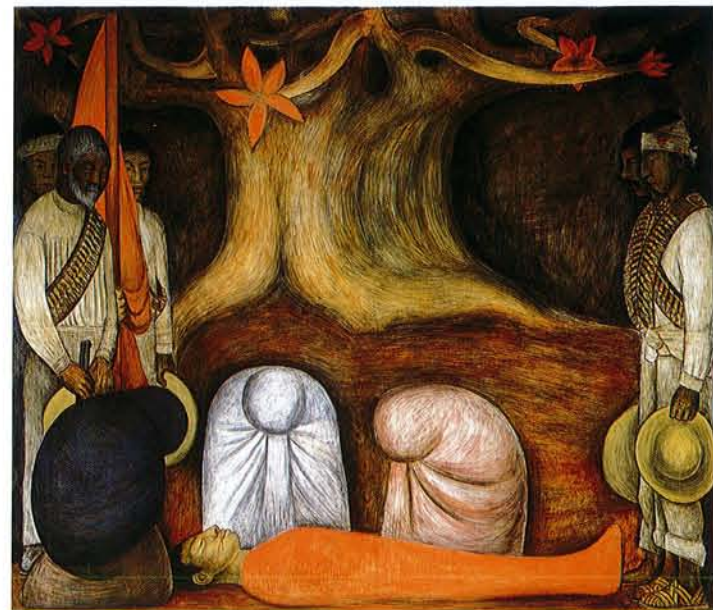
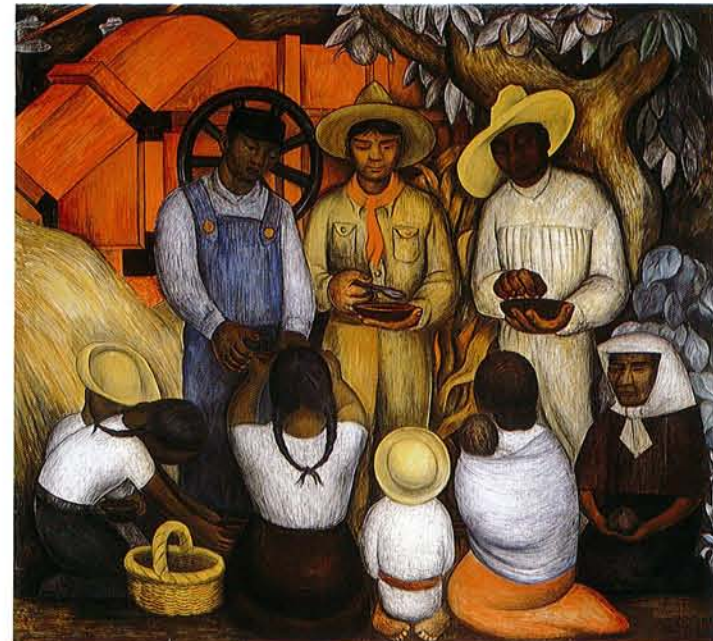
79 top left
Diego Rivera: *The Organization of the Agrarian Movement*. Fresco, 1926. Chapel, west wall, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.



80 bottom left
Diego Rivera: *The Abundant Earth*. Fresco, 1926. Chapel, east wall, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.



81 top right
Diego Rivera: *Triumph of the Revolution*. Fresco, 1926. Chapel, west wall, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.



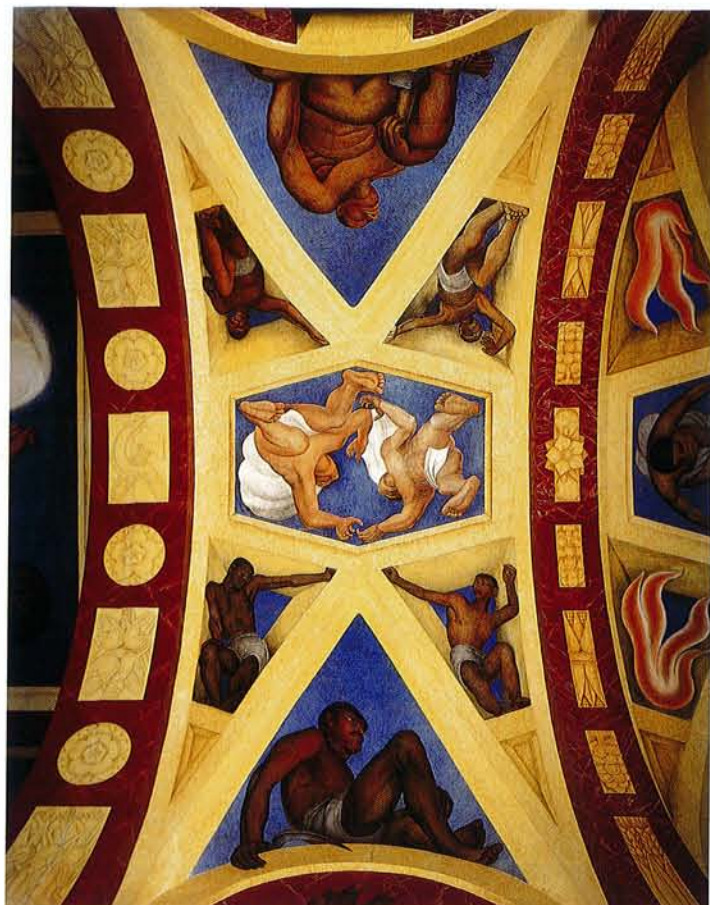
78 & 82 opposite and bottom right
Diego Rivera: *Revolution - Germination*. Fresco, 1926. Chapel, west wall, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.

83
Diego Rivera: *Revelation of the Way*.
Fresco, 1926. Chapel, ceiling bay,
Autonomous University of
Chapingo, Mexico.

84 below
Diego Rivera: *The Land's Bounty
Rightfully Possessed*. Fresco, 1926.
Chapel, ceiling bay, Autonomous
University of Chapingo, Mexico.

85 opposite
Diego Rivera: *The Liberated Earth
with the Natural Forces Controlled by
Man*. Fresco, 1926. Chapel, north
wall, Autonomous University of
Chapingo, Mexico.

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on the stairwell of the Labour Courtyard, Rivera made a pictorial reference to Italian renaissance painting, specifically in this instance to a panel in Giotto's fresco cycle in the Arena Chapel in Padua.

Leading on from *The Blood of the Martyrs*, Rivera concluded the left-hand side of the chapel with the panel *Triumph of the Revolution*. In an image which refers to the sacraments, Rivera pictured the trinity of revolution: the soldier, the peasant and the worker, each giving to and consuming with their families the full fruits of their labour, born out of the struggle of the revolution. Opposite this image of revolutionary fulfillment an abundant harvest is depicted in the panel *Fruits in Season*.

The Liberated Earth with the Natural Forces Controlled by Man

Painted on the huge altar wall of the chapel stands as a glorious conclusion to the portrayal of revolutionary transformation and natural evolution. Painted after Rivera's wife Guadalupe Marín, who was then pregnant with their first child, the monumental and voluptuous nude reclines, representing the fertile earth. Attending her are the forces of nature, fire, wind and water. Water is represented by a woman who sits in front of a giant hydro-electric tube which enters the labia of the earth in a symbolic act of penetration.

Panels in the vaulted ceiling complement the ones below with images of men clutching hammers and sickles and sheaves of corn emphasizing the idea of the socialized transformation of the land. High up in a large arched panel directly opposite the altar





wall the fertility of the land is symbolized by the beautiful and erotic image of a female nude. Entitled *The Virgin Earth*, she shields a young cactus in her open palm.⁵⁹

Like Siqueiros' and de la Cuevas' collaborative work in Guadalajara, Rivera extended this cycle to include the carving of the wooden doors to the building. An interesting parallel can be drawn between the doors of the Extemplo de la Universidad in Guadalajara and those at Chapingo. Although the styles are quite different, both are attempts to extend by way of three dimensionality the painted themes inside into an integration of painting, sculpture, and architecture. The three-dimensional work at Chapingo extended to the interior of the chapel, where the benches, altar table and accompanying chairs were carved with revolutionary emblems echoing those painted in the ceiling area above.

The chapel of Chapingo represents one of Rivera's most outstanding achievements. As a poetic narrative of revolutionary impulse and national texture, it has few equals, either within Rivera's own mural work or within the work of Orozco and Siqueiros. Rivera created a pictorial synthesis in which he fused into a visual poem an awareness of his country's agrarian revolution and that of its long and deeply rooted agrarian culture. The sentiments that permeate this secular work reflect the religious and spiritual traditions of the Mexican people. The influence of Italian renaissance painting that pervades so many of the images points not only to Rivera's artistic sources but also indicates the presence of European Christian culture in Mexican history. Simultaneously, Rivera's use of symbolic figures, for instance in the panels *Subterranean Forces* and *Germination*, is rooted in the use of similar figures in pre-Columbian cultures. Despite these references, the work at Chapingo is unmistakably contemporary. Its subject is the revolutionary struggle of the present to right the injustices of the past, and the chapel is '... the first of the great works of art born of socialist and agrarian materialism'.⁶⁰

Together with the frescoes at the Ministry of Education, the cycle at Chapingo represents the earliest definition of the general characteristics of the Mexican mural movement during the 1920s. Beside these works, the murals painted by Rivera at the Ministry of Health in Mexico City in late 1928, based on images



of nudes symbolizing *Life, Health, Fortitude, Knowledge, Purity* and *Conscience*, represent only an interlude before he turned his attention to his next great epic of Mexican history and his grandiloquent visions of the industrial and technological modernity of North America.

The conclusion of Rivera's work at Chapingo and the Ministry of Education, together with the murals that Orozco and Siqueiros had painted, marked the end of the first stage of Mexico's mural renaissance. Under the auspices of Vasconcelos it had started at the beginning of the decade with a blaze of impassioned idealism but only a hesitant grasp of its pictorial, ideological, cultural and aesthetic agenda. During the 1920s social and political developments in Mexico formed the basis on which the painters evolved a public art, with images that were more emphatically drawn from the deep well of national idealism and experience than their first hesitant works had ever been able to reflect. The themes of revolution, the land and the cultural traditions of the people emerged in the murals of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. The work created by the three painters during the following decades would be fundamentally different from these populist beginnings.

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