

# INTRODUCTION

In 1951 the British art critic Herbert Read lamented what he considered to be the Soviet Union's failure, after more than thirty years of strenuous effort, to produce a new art on the basis of a new economy. In *The Philosophy of Modern Art* Read wrote

We must wait, perhaps for a very long time, before any vital connection can be re-established between art and society. The modern work of art . . . is a symbol. The symbol, by its very nature, is intelligible only to the initiated (though it may appeal mysteriously to the uninitiated, so long as they allow it to enter their unconscious). . . . It does not seem that the contradiction which exists between the aristocratic function of art and the democratic structure of modern society can ever be resolved.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly three decades earlier, coinciding with the early years of Soviet society, the Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros issued a manifesto on behalf of the Syndicate of Technical Workers and Sculptors, a newly created artists' trade union. The manifesto declared the coming of a new and revolutionary art in Mexico. In it, Siqueiros wrote

We repudiate so-called easel painting and every kind of art favored by ultra-intellectual circles, because it is aristocratic, and we praise monumental art in all its forms, because it is public property. We proclaim at this time of social change from a decrepit order to a new one, the creators of beauty must use their best efforts to produce ideological works for the people; art must no longer be the expression of individual satisfaction (which) it is today, but should aim to become a fighting educative art for all.<sup>2</sup>

Between this radical proclamation of the young Mexican painters of the early 1920s and the later reflective scepticism expressed by Read lay a huge divide. It was a divide not of time, but of perception and recognition. Read had not recognized, despite what he considered to be the failure of Soviet art, and against the grain of much of what he claimed was the function of art in the democratic structure of modern society, that a vital connection had indeed been created in the twentieth century between art and society. The art in this case was a renaissance of public mural painting and the society that of post-revolutionary Mexico.

The presence of Mexican muralism in the history of twentieth-century culture is in many ways an anachronism in relation to the tenets of modernist aesthetics, practise and theory. Within this dominating Western perception of modern art history, the Mexican mural renaissance is seen as being 'in deliberate opposition to the course of modernist art as practised in Europe and the United States of America'.<sup>3</sup>

This opposition is in many respects deeply problematic. In standing outside and against the main thrust of modernist practice, Mexican mural painting has often become hostage to critical fortune. Arguments have prevailed for and against its self-proclaimed premise as a revolutionary art of substantive social function, of creative and aesthetic originality. Its adherents and supporters have interpreted it as a fundamental challenge to the concept of the avant-garde artist of modern Western art, who, as

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Clement Greenberg wrote, 'Retiring from public altogether . . . sought to maintain the high level of his art by narrowing it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would either be resolved or beside the point. "Art for Art's sake" and "pure poetry" appear, and subject-matter or content becomes something to be avoided like the plague'.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the whole project of Mexican muralism, particularly in its initial stages, was presented as a synthesis of art and the popular imagination, a concept described by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht as being 'intelligible to the broad masses, adopting and enriching their forms of expression, assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it . . . relating to traditions and developing them'.<sup>5</sup>

Critics of Mexican muralism have cast aspersions on its claim to occupy a central position within the story of modern Western art. Some have interpreted it as essentially a propagandist programme, placing it outside what they consider to be the essential characteristic of modern art, that of 'stylistic evolution'. In his essay on modernist painting, Clement Greenberg implicitly rejected any place for such a movement as Mexican muralism when he wrote that

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of the medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. . . . Realistic or illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art.<sup>6</sup>

Against this canon of modernist aesthetics Mexican muralism represented in almost every sense the exact opposite of what Greenberg argued was ' . . . the proper area of each art'. Not only was it a realistic and figurative movement, but it was one whose identity centred on the expression of public meanings. Furthermore, notwithstanding the formal innovation that characterized Siqueiros' mural painting, the Mexican muralists' principal objective was not pictorial innovation, associated with so much of twentieth-century Western painting. The muralists' point of departure and primary concern was for a public and accessible visual dialogue with the Mexican people. Critical

opinion over the last forty years has often neglected or marginalized Mexican muralism largely because, as the Mexican writer Luis Cardoza y Aragón has observed, such critical opinion could see no 'formally new, strictly pictorial contribution to the currents that interest them'.<sup>7</sup>

However, historical accuracy makes it imperative that the artistic achievements of the Mexican mural renaissance no longer be regarded as anything other than a contribution of equal significance to that of Western art during the twentieth century. Equally important to any claim of artistic recognition are the aims and ideas that lay behind the genesis and development of Mexican muralism. In the late twentieth century, when much of the thesis of modernism has been questioned by other discourses, Mexican muralism represents a significant challenge to the commonly accepted view of the role and position of the artist in Western society. That position is sometimes seen as one of intellectual and economic isolation, in which the primary function of the artist is a revelation of self expressed in a hermetic relationship formed by the will to create and the work created.

The Mexican muralists were neither artistically nor intellectually isolated from Mexican society. They played a central role in the cultural and social life of the country following the 1910–1917 nationalist revolution. Rather than a revelation of individual self, in the first instance the murals expressed a communality of national experience. The artists' murals could not be bought and sold, for they were created and commissioned as permanent fixtures in some of the most important public buildings of Mexico. As a public art, one of whose principal aims was to represent a notion of democratic cultural enfranchisement, the murals became a vital part of the patina of Mexican civic and national life for huge sections of the Mexican people.

The history of the Mexican mural renaissance, which started at the beginning of the 1920s during the administration of General Obregón, is in many senses a long and complex story, full of contradictions and paradoxes, myth and legend. For some, it was an art movement dominated by three artists of international renown, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, whose work came to define the essence of what the movement stood for. Others see it as part of a wider cultural

8 revolution that flowered in Mexico following the 1910 revolution, but whose roots predated the revolution.

From either perspective, the movement's emanation from the catharsis of the Mexican revolution has resulted in the construction of an entire mythology of revolutionary art. Together with its leading personalities, the movement has often been seen as the benchmark against which arguments concerning art and the people, society and revolution have been tested. During the worst period of the 1930s Depression in the United States of America, when the Roosevelt administration embarked on a policy of state-funded initiatives to alleviate hardship, supporters of the Federal Arts Project looked to the Mexican mural movement as a model for a new democratic, radical art. In May 1933 the artist George Biddle wrote to President Roosevelt

There is a matter, which I have long considered and which some day might interest your administration. The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because Obregón allowed Mexican artists to work for plumbers' wages in order to express on the walls of the government buildings the social ideas of the Mexican revolution. . . . The younger artists of America are conscious as they have never been of the social revolution our country and civilization are going through; and they would be eager to express these ideals in a permanent art form if they were given the government's cooperation. They would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the social ideals that you are struggling for. And I am convinced that our mural art with a little impetus can soon result for the first time in our history in a vital national expression.<sup>8</sup>

During the Depression, many other artists in the United States also found a spiritual nexus in the mythology of Mexican muralism which reflected their own aspirations. One such artist, Mitchell Siroporin, wrote

Contemporary artists everywhere have witnessed the amazing spectacle of the modern renaissance of mural painting in Mexico, and they have been deeply moved by its profound artistry and meaning. Through the lessons of our Mexican teachers, we have been made aware of the scope and fullness of the 'soul' of our environment. We have been made aware of the application of modernism toward a socially moving epic art of our times and place. We have discovered for ourselves a richer feeling in the fabric of the history of our place.<sup>9</sup>

In many respects the mythology surrounding Mexican muralism also became transformed into a kind of sanctification. Orozco observed that 'The highest, the most logical, the purest form of painting is the mural. It is, too, the most disinterested form, for it cannot be made a matter of private gain: it cannot be hidden away for the benefit of a certain privileged few. It is for the people. It is for ALL'.<sup>10</sup>

Such observations concerning the disinterested nature of the mural reinforced perceptions concerning the presumed democratic aim of the muralists, their publicly proclaimed intentions and their achievements. Rivera, for example, wrote that Mexican muralism had 'for the first time in the history of monumental painting ceased to use gods, kings, chiefs of state, heroic generals, etc. as central heroes. . . . For the first time in the history of Art, Mexican mural painting made the masses the hero of monumental art'.<sup>11</sup>

However, the democratic and revolutionary mythology surrounding the form, content and ideological intention of Mexican muralism has often served to obscure rather than to enlighten. Outside Mexico, the claims made upon muralism have been left largely unchallenged. Both critics and followers have served to fuel the myth. In *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, Herbert Read declined to include the works of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros on the grounds that 'like some of their Russian contemporaries, they have adopted a propagandist programme for their art, which seems to me to place it outside the stylistic evolution which is my exclusive concern'.<sup>12</sup>

Mexican muralism, and particularly the murals of its three leading artists, is too important to leave to mythology and unchallenged assumptions. Siqueiros claimed the 'fundamental aesthetic goal' of the movement was 'to socialize artistic expression and wipe out bourgeois individualism, to repudiate the practice of easel painting, to commit itself to the goal of a monumental public mural art, and to direct itself . . . to the native races humiliated for centuries; to the soldiers made into hangmen by their officers, to the peasants and workers scourged by the rich'.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore imperative that claims and achievements are tested and questioned and facts disconnected from the creation of the inevitable fiction in order to clarify our understanding of the real nature, aims and achievements of the Mex-

ican mural renaissance, and its place in the history of twentieth-century culture.

Were, for example, the complex dynamics of Mexican society during the revolution such that the birth of public muralism was largely a fortunate occurrence due to the commitment of one man, whose government post allowed for the initial realization of a few mural commissions? Or was it an inevitable consequence of the cultural, political and social reverberations following the ending of the Mexican revolution?

Were the radical aims and intentions of the movement, as articulated by its leaders in the first years of its existence, sustained throughout the decades that followed? Or did they, like the society from which the movement emanated, undergo such a transformation that the movement and its role in Mexican society became unrecognizable in relation to its original premises?

Does the mythology surrounding the Mexican mural movement, as a socially radical form of art, serve to hide divergent attitudes, intentions and artistic achievement, thereby questioning the whole idea of a singular aesthetic and ideological definition and the identity of Mexican muralism?

In what terms can the Mexican mural movement legitimately be discussed as revolutionary? Did it merely reflect the country's

revolutionary society or did the murals, in a political sense, function as catalysts of change? Furthermore, to what extent were the murals really a public art for the masses? Were they in reality a form of state-institutionalized urban art, the intellectual preserve of the developing nationalist Mexican bourgeoisie?

Such questions are tools with which to begin unravelling and clarifying the important issues in relation to Mexican muralism. However, where we intervene in the history of this unique movement to begin such a task is in itself an important issue. Mexican muralism is often understood in terms of a common definition, and a common identity, a movement of coherence and singular purpose. In whatever way we understand that purpose, Mexican muralism was also the sum of its individual parts, the creation of many artists working over many decades. However, Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros indisputably stand out, and form an essential point of departure in any attempt to understand the movement. Their murals have often been interpreted as giving the Mexican mural painting renaissance its singularity and identity. Yet as three profoundly individual artists, they have artistic and ideological divergences. This difference underlines the richness and breadth of their mural work, and the reasons for the outstanding achievement of the Mexican mural movement.



## ONE

# CULTURE AND REVOLUTION

## THE POLITICS OF CONTEXT

The mural work of Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros spans five decades from the early 1920s to, in the case of Siqueiros, the early 1970s. During that time Mexico underwent an enormous transformation from a mostly rural, semi-literate revolutionary nationalist society to a developed, largely industrialized and modern country. The murals of Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros reflect the development of an extraordinary and arguably unique relationship between an art movement and a modern twentieth-century society. How the murals of these three painters reflected the changing realities of Mexico and its people, and how in turn the people perceived the murals throughout those changing decades feeds into the important wider question concerning the function that art can have within a modern secular society.

As contemporaries, Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros grew up during the period of the 'Porfiriato'. This pre-revolutionary society, presided over by the dictator Porfirio Díaz for more than thirty years from 1876 to his eventual overthrow in 1910, influenced every facet of Mexican social life. It was a society marked by enormous divisions of wealth, property and power. In the countryside power was vested in a small class of landowners, whose hold over the land was such that by 1910, 90 per cent of the Mexican peasantry had been dispossessed of its land and forced to live under the iniquitous system of debt peonage.<sup>1</sup> Haciendas, the huge estates of Mexico's landed aristocracy, covered more than half the total area of the country. As if to reinforce the predicament of the mass of landless Mexican

peasantry at this time, many of the country's landowners, or *hacendados*, were foreigners.

This colonizing of the land was mirrored in other areas of Mexican economic and industrial life. Díaz's rule was marked by a concerted effort to push Mexico into the twentieth century. To this end he encouraged massive foreign investment in Mexico, to be fed by a well of cheap and obedient labour. As a result, significant areas of Mexico's agricultural land as well as large parts of the country's economic and industrial infrastructure came under the control or influence of foreign owners, industrialists and speculators.

The degree to which Díaz allowed and encouraged this external control over his country's economic and industrial life was, paradoxically, fuelled by a genuine sense of national pride. He wanted Mexico to be dragged out of its backward past into the future. It was an attempt to secure for Mexico a place of pride, prestige and power from which it could begin to compete on equal terms with its much more powerful North American and Western European rivals. But it was a vain attempt, for the regime of Porfirio Díaz was a political culture controlled by a large group of positivist, Darwinist bureaucrats whom Díaz gathered around him. Known as the *Científicos* (scientific thinkers), they became 'the ideological backbone of the regime, whose emblem was "order and progress". But the order was equated with oppression and progress with the well-being of a few at the expense of a poverty-stricken rural population.'<sup>2</sup>



Headed by Díaz's main advisor, José Ives Limantour, the *Científicos* saw their positivist philosophy as a rational means to extricate Mexico from the poverty and backwardness of its past. However, the principal flaw in their project was their favouring of the white Mexican and the foreigner over the vast mass of the Mexican population which was either Meztizo or pure Indian. This belief prevailed amongst many of the bureaucratic élite of the Díaz regime and was exemplified by the attitudes of people such as Francisco Bulnes. A leading positivist intellectual of the time, Bulnes considered in his book *The Future of the Latin American Nations* (1899) that Indians, Africans and Asians were condemned to permanent inferiority by their environment and poor diet. For the *Científicos*, white European and North American modernity was the touchstone of Mexico's salvation and transformation into a modern industrial state, an attitude reflected in the economic and industrial policies of the dictatorship.

The main philosophical opposition to the dominance of the *Científicos* came in the form of an intellectual revolt which began with the creation of the *Ateneo de la Juventud* (Athenaeum of Youth) in 1907. This lecture and debating society was formed by a number of leading liberal intellectuals in Mexico who opposed the whole basis of the Díaz regime. Like most other countries in Latin America in the nineteenth and early twentieth century,

Mexico had a small élite group of intellectuals. Traditionally this élite generally supported the *status quo*. However, during the nineteenth century there were also a number of important radical individuals within this group. Figures such as Guillermo Prieto, Ignacio Ramírez and Ignacio Altimirano often manifested a deep social concern. This radical tradition was taken up by those who formed the Ateneo; its leading members, men such as Antonio Caso, Alfonso Reyes and perhaps most significantly José Vasconcelos, were all eventually to support the revolution and to take part in the forging of 'a new type of Mexican culture'.<sup>3</sup>

While the members of the Ateneo helped change the intellectual climate of the Porfiriato in the years immediately preceding the overthrow of the dictator, political and industrial opposition was simultaneously being felt across the country. In 1906 the group *Regeneración* led by Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón issued a manifesto from exile in St. Louis, Missouri, calling for freedom of speech and the press, the suppression of political bosses, the secularization of education and the restoration of lands appropriated from the peasantry. In the same year the copper miners of Cananea went on major strike against their employers, the Green Consolidated Copper Company of America. The strike provoked a violent response from the company, which sent in a battalion of American Rangers to quell the industrial action.<sup>4</sup> A year later similar unrest hit the textile industry at Río Blanco, where demands by workers for recognition of labour organizations were put down in a bloody massacre. It was against this background that the revolution in Mexico grew.

The birth of the Mexican revolution is often cited as having begun in March 1908, when Porfirio Díaz, in an interview with James Creelman of *Pearson's* magazine, called for the emergence of an opposition party as 'proof of Mexico's ability to develop a true democracy'.<sup>5</sup> But as the old dictator's term of office drew to a close in the latter half of 1910 it became obvious that the proof would not materialize when, on 4 October, his unelected deputies once again declared him to have been re-elected President of the Republic.

In the same year that Díaz called for the emergence of an opposition party, Francisco Madero, a liberal democrat, issued a book entitled *The Presidential Succession*, in which he demanded

3  
Francisco Madero, escorted by  
Emiliano Zapata, during the  
presidential election campaign of  
June 1911, in Cuernavaca, Morales.

universal suffrage and no re-election of the president. But, as the main opposition candidate, Madero was imprisoned by Díaz on the eve of the 1910 presidential election. Escaping to the United States, Madero formally proclaimed a revolution against the Díaz government on 20 November in his Plan of San Luis Potosí. The news of Madero's proclamation spread quickly throughout the country. His influence on the Mexican masses began to take root, and everyone with a grievance against the Díaz regime saw in Madero the symbol of their hopes and dreams. On 14 Febru-

ary 1911 Madero crossed the United States' border into Chihuahua, where the conscript army sent to crush this revolution promptly deserted, joining his cause.

The downfall of Díaz was however more a dissolution than an insurrection by the masses. As Hans Greunig wrote, 'No violent upheaval overthrew Díaz. A stately edifice long admired from without for its magnificence and apparent stability unexpectedly crumbled. A disintegration had taken place in the body politic and social.'<sup>6</sup> Under pressure of events Díaz resigned on 25

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May 1911, and the following day sailed from Veracruz into exile in Europe.

Díaz's departure from Mexico eventually led to the outbreak of internecine warfare between former supporters of the old dictator and those opposed to him, as well as amongst the various revolutionary forces. This complex battle for power led to a protracted civil war which finally ended some ten years later. During that period over a million Mexicans lost their lives. In 1920, the constitutionalist army general Alvaro Obregón, who had been an important figure in the revolution, was elected President of Mexico. Obregón's short term of office marked the beginning of a long and difficult period in which the political process unleashed by the revolution would eventually come to be consolidated and institutionalized in the formation of a single ruling party, the PRI (Institutional Party of the Revolution). With the election of Obregón, Mexico not only swept away the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, but also consigned to history the country's old ruling class. Its powerbase in the church, the army

and the *hacendados* had been completely destroyed and with it, the dreaded yoke of debt peonage.

Although the old regime was eventually overthrown, the revolution itself was a complicated, bloody and often contradictory process. While Emiliano Zapata's cry of 'Land and Freedom' symbolized the struggle of the peasantry for land, Zapata's cause was surrounded by a crude and violent competition for power, in which many of the revolution's greatest heroes were murdered by their supposed allies. Such a tragedy is well expressed by Antonio Rodríguez, who wrote of

the shooting of Otilio Montano, one of Zapata's enlightened ideologists, by Zapata himself. Or that of Paulino Matínez, another ideologist, by Francisco Villa. . . . anyone who saw Zapata fall on the orders of Carranza, and Carranza by the orders of Obregón would look on the revolution as a blood bath, in which revolutionaries like Felipe Angeles, Villa, Zapata and many others died at the hands of their companions in arms.<sup>7</sup>

4  
Supporters of Francisco Madero,  
c.1911.

5  
Banquet at the National Palace,  
Mexico City in December 1914.  
Seated, left to right, are José  
Vasconcelos, Pancho Villa,  
President Gutiérrez and Emiliano  
Zapata.

The result of those chaotic years was to transform the country not into a communist or socialist state, but into one of revolutionary nationalism. This radical nationalism had its roots deep in the political history of Mexico's 300 years of Spanish colonial dependency and its aftermath. Mexico's struggle to break free



with its independence in 1821 was initially followed by the United States of America's occupation of the country and later, in a similar but much longer quest for colonial domination, by France in the 1860s. Despite these colonialist incursions, the country's tenuous grasp of its fragile independence was strengthened during the middle years of the nineteenth century by the period of the liberal reform under the presidency of Benito Juárez. In part this was because 'With both the independence and the republic faced with extinction, the liberals obviously had to appeal to ideals of collective sacrifice and civic duty rather than continue to insist on the primacy of self-interest of the individual. . . . At this decisive juncture the radical ideologues of the reform, Ignacio Ramírez and Manuel Altimirano, invoked the concept of the "patria".<sup>8</sup> Justo Sierra, Altimirano's foremost disciple, wrote that 'Liberty had triumphed; the great reforming revolution had become confounded with a war of independence and Patria, Republic and Reforma were henceforth the same thing.'<sup>9</sup>

With the advent of the revolution, intellectuals such as Molína Enríquez, Manuel Gamio and José Vasconcelos took the ideology of Liberal Patriotism and transformed it not only into an idea of Mexican nationhood but, as importantly, into the basis of a specifically Mexican nationalist theory. It was against this intellectual and political revolutionary backdrop that a tide of national demands and desires was released. Some of the demands were in opposition to everything that the positivist intellectuals of Díaz's *Científicos* had stood for. Others opposed the liberal capitalism of the United States. At a popular level, the nationalists of the revolution appealed 'to tradition and invoked myths and ideas already formulated during the wars of independence. Here was the origin of the prevalent "indigenismo" and the exaltation of the insurgent heroes. In this instance the revolution represented a revival and a reevaluation of fading traditions and repudiation of the liberal positivist epoch.'<sup>10</sup>

This quest for national, cultural and intellectual self-expression and definition, which had begun to manifest itself long before the economic and political needs of the country finally provoked revolt, is significant. The development of Mexican muralism can be seen to grow out of a Mexican cultural renaissance, the roots of which were clearly present and developing before the revolution. This renaissance synthesized with the political revolution to form a unique relationship between a tide of radical national politics and a cultural rediscovery of national definition and identity that would in the end reach beyond the purely Mexican. As the celebrated Mexican art historian Justinio Fernández has written, 'the nationalist ideas went well beyond their limits and finally took on a humanistic character of universal scope. Nowhere is this better expressed than in contemporary mural painting. To understand this art is to consider and submerge oneself in the spiritual, social, political, philosophical, and historical problems of our time, not only in Mexico, but in the panorama of world culture.'<sup>11</sup>

The renaissance of twentieth-century mural painting in Mexico can be linked to a number of roots and cultural developments in the years leading up to the revolution. Of these, that which perhaps most obviously drew into focus the issues, ideas and personalities that would be associated with the eventual flower-

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16 ing of muralism, was an exhibition of indigenous Mexican art organized by the painter Gerardo Murillo (1875–1964; better known by his adopted Nahuatl name of Dr. Atl) at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City in September 1910. The exhibition was intended to present a nationalist response to the official government exhibition of contemporary Spanish painting sponsored by Porfirio Díaz to mark the centenary of Mexico's struggle for independence from Spanish colonialism. Atl's exhibition reflected the groundswell of nationalist feeling amongst the country's growing band of nationalist artists and intellectuals, for whom the official exhibition of Spanish painting typified the insufferably exclusive European cultural preoccupations of the nation's ruling classes.

Despite these preoccupations, a specifically Mexican art had already begun to emerge during the years preceding the outbreak of the revolution. History painting as a genre gradually developed, eventually including purely Mexican subjects, even though these were usually painted according to classical ideals of beauty.

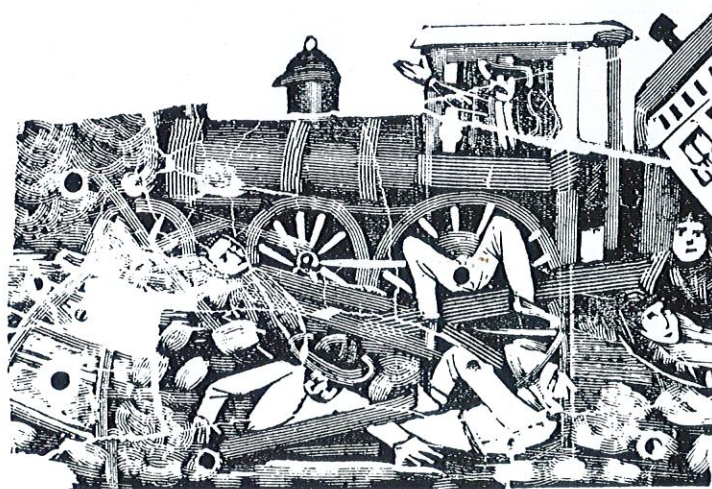
Nineteenth-century artists such as Leandro Izaguirre, in his painting *The Martyrdom of Cuauhtemoc* (1892; Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City), and Felix Parra, in his depiction of the violence of the conquest in *Episodes of the Conquest* (1877; Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City), reflected the development of a sense of national consciousness in Mexican art. Indian painters, such as José Obregón and Rodrigo Gutiérrez, also began to emerge. The Mexican countryside became a central and significant theme in Mexican painting. José Maria Velasco, the most celebrated of Mexico's landscape painters, exemplified this dimension of national cultural consciousness in his panoramas depicting the central valley of Mexico. The growth of popular art also led to an explosion of work representing every and any subject that was Mexican, often by entirely unknown artists. But none represented the development of an indigenous Mexican art more than the popular engraver José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913). Rodríguez describes Posada's work as

a regular register of events and a gallery of types which cannot have been equalled for range and variety anywhere in the history of engraving. Were it possible to collect all fifteen or twenty thousand wood-

6 above  
José Guadalupe Posada: newspaper engraving depicting a murder, 1910.



7 below  
José Guadalupe Posada: newspaper engraving depicting a train accident, 1907.





lead- and zinc-cuts as well as the lithographs produced by Posada between 1871 and 1913, one would have a comprehensive record of all the outstanding events in the history of Mexico, pictured as they occurred during a period of almost fifty years.<sup>12</sup>

But Posada's work, usually published in Vanegas Arroyas' street newspapers *Gaceta Callejera*, *El Bolletín* and *El Centavo Perdido*, was more than a mere catalogue of events. As a man of the people, Posada remained close to them all his working life. He was a rebel repelled by the injustices of the dictatorship of the Porfiriato. Prints such as *The Ruling Misery*, *The Ballad of Four Zapatistas killed by Firing Squad* and *The Horrible Crimes of the Landowners* show Posada as a political populist, championing the cause of justice and freedom.

The sense of national resurgence reflected in Atl's Mexican exhibition highlighted the radical nature of this cultural development, for many of the artists involved in the exhibition were either members of, or associated with, the Ateneo. Francisco de la Torre and Roberto Montenegro, for example, presented images of contemporary indigenous figures. Saturnino Herrán and Jorge Encisco depicted pre-Hispanic themes, in such works as *The Legend of the Volcanos* (by Herrán; 1910, Col. Pinacoteca del Ateneo Fuente de Saltillo) and *Anahuac* (by Encisco) in which 'the figure of the Indian stands as a symbolic and allegorical representation of spiritual and moral virtues in the race. . . . Encisco uses the pre-Hispanic Indian as a symbol of the nation, but it is his exalted attitude, his spiritualism that is the distinguishing principal characteristic.'<sup>13</sup>

Paradoxically, much of the work in the Mexican exhibition shared many common features with that of the Spanish painters in the government's official show. As Coleby has written,

Notwithstanding the nationalist implications that the (Mexican) exhibition assumed towards the painters of the old capital, the painters in both exhibitions shared common roots. Painting in the Spanish exhibition was characterized predominantly by 'costumbrista' themes. . . . Equally in the Mexican exhibition, the predominance of national, above all 'indegenista' themes corresponded to the characteristics of costumbrismo and modernism.<sup>14</sup>

However, Atl's Mexican exhibition was more than simply a nationalist project. It also promoted, as Atl himself had done in the years preceding it, a view of art that was anti-academic and, in Mexican terms, modernist. Notions of modernity amongst Mexican artists had been vigorously promoted in the years leading up to the 1910 Mexican exhibition through the journal *Savia Moderna*. The group of artists associated with *Savia Moderna*, amongst whom was Diego Rivera, took a stand against the analytical and objective realism which they saw as a reflection of the prevailing ruling ideology of scientific positivism of the Díaz dictatorship. They opposed art produced at the Academy, which they saw as mirroring this philosophy, promoting in its place a view of art that was essentially spiritual and symbolist. Indeed, one of the principal aesthetic currents of these years was the reaction against academic realism.



9  
Federal conscripts, Mexico City,  
c.1915.

revolution and a new Mexican culture. Orozco wrote that during

nightly sessions in the Academy, as we listened to the fervent voice of that agitator Dr. Atl, we began to suspect that the whole colonial situation was nothing but a swindle foisted on us by international traders. We too had a character, which was quite the equal of any other. We would learn what the ancients and the foreigners could teach us, but we could do as much as they or more. It was not pride, but self confidence that moved us to this belief, a sense of our own being and our destiny.<sup>17</sup>

Atl's admiration for the murals of the Italian renaissance was based not so much on the notion that they represented the model for a new social art, but more on his belief that they reflected his conception of the 'spiritual' in art. Atl admired the frescoes of Michelangelo and Leonardo for their spiritualism and spontaneous energy. Indeed, it was this dimension that he considered to be the basis for the creation of a Mexican *modernismo*.

Following the success of his 1910 Mexican exhibition, Atl formed what he came to call his *Centro Artístico* (Artistic Centre). The aim of this centre, in which Orozco participated amongst others, was to find walls of public buildings on which to paint murals. Significantly, Atl conceived of this idea not in terms of a visual social polemic, but in terms of decoration, an approach that was much in keeping with his view of art as essentially spiritual and symbolist. Though his ideas for mural painting did not envisage the kind of social radicalism that was to become identified with the mural movement after the revolution, the method he intended to employ certainly foreshadowed the radical collectivist team work that Siqueiros sought to develop during the 1930s. For example, in 1910 Atl gained permission from Justo Sierra, Minister of Education under Díaz, to paint the walls of the Bolivar Amphitheatre in the National Preparatory School in Mexico City, a project which the newspaper *El Imparcial* reported was to be created by members of the Artistic Centre who had agreed 'to collaborate together on a single project'.<sup>18</sup>

Atl's artistic position was not, as the nationalist groundswell of feeling at the time might suggest, simply anti-European. He did oppose the belief that European art was innately superior to Mexican art but, like many artists of this period, he was also

Atl is often seen as the ideological precursor and theoretical proponent of Mexican muralism. In the early years of the twentieth century he was one of the leading proponents of the idea of the creation of a national art that would be based on the aesthetic 'spiritualistic' concepts of *modernismo*, as expressed by the artists surrounding *Savia Moderna*.<sup>15</sup> His demand for a national art was inspired by the idea of creating in Mexico, through the revelation of universal values, a school of modern painting, on equal terms with that of the Europeans.

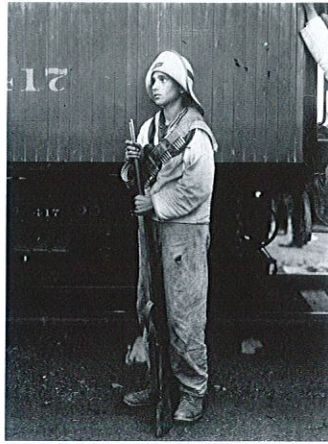
Atl was a politically rebellious figure and stimulating teacher at the Academy of San Carlos. He had travelled extensively in Europe in the 1890s and early 1900s, and, returning to Mexico in 1903, brought to the attention of the young artists around him the importance of the murals of the Italian renaissance. Orozco recalled how Atl spoke 'in his easy insinuating, enthusiastic tone of his travels in Europe and his stay in Rome. When he spoke of the Sistine Chapel his voice took fire.'<sup>16</sup> Atl was also a fervent radical and political nationalist. At the academy he became a focal point of reference for the young students, who were stimulated by his anti-colonialism and his proselytizing of

particularly interested in developments that were occurring in Europe. In this respect, the *Modernista* movement in Mexico, championed in the pages of the magazine *Revista Moderna*, was of notable significance. Works by Rodin and Beardsley were illustrated in the magazine, and Japanese art, art nouveau and the symbolist concept that art was another reality and not just an allusion to something were all promoted.

The theme of 'Human Evolution' proposed by Justo Sierra for the mural on the walls of the Bolivar Amphitheatre thus held particular appeal for Atl and his fellow artists of the *Centro Artístico*. They saw the theme as being essentially symbolist, as much connected to their current thinking concerning the development of modern Mexican art as it was to its European counterpart.

Atl's influence on the development of Mexican muralism was one derived essentially from his presence as a political figurehead and mentor, first as a teacher and then, during the revolution, as the Director of the Academy of San Carlos. Atl's powerful radicalism was perhaps as much an influence as anything else on the young painters who would eventually create the Mexican mural movement after the revolution. His approach towards the teaching and practice of art and the institution of the Academy was particularly significant. In his nomination speech as the Director of the Academy, Atl said 'Being the foe of academic institutions, how can I present a plan for reform, suggest a curriculum for a set-up that I judge pernicious?'<sup>19</sup> Atl urged his students and fellow artists to create a national art which would be monumental in form and public in its accessibility, and to adopt the use of workshops and group work in the teaching of art and creative production. At his nomination he also spoke of his dilemma of 'whether to propose that the school be scrapped, or else converted into a workshop geared for production like any industrial workshop of today, or like all workshops of all epochs when art flowered vigorously'.<sup>20</sup>

Following his closure of the open-air Santa Anita School of Painting, which his predecessor Alfredo Ramos Matínez had opened on the outskirts of Mexico City following a student strike in 1911 against the rigidity of the teaching methods employed at the Academy by the current Director, Antonio Rivas Mercado, Atl stated that



10  
Girl soldier, 'soldadera' of the  
Mexican revolution.

11  
Soldiers of the Federal army, 1915.

12  
Wounded Federal soldier, 1915.

13  
Diego Rivera (third from left) and  
José Vasconcelos (second from left)  
at a political meeting in  
Chapultepec Park, Mexico City,  
1923.



is evident that his participation in organizing the workers of the capital into the red battalions was an incentive to the ex-students of the school of Fine Arts and the striking students of the school to participate in the political and military life of modern Mexico.<sup>23</sup> Atl's profound influence on the young painters of this period makes his presence integral to the story of the birth of Mexican muralism.

Similarly, nothing can be written about Mexican mural painting without mentioning the crucial presence of José Vasconcelos. As one of the major intellectuals of Mexico's revolutionary cultural renaissance, Vasconcelos became one of its key inspirational figures. As the Secretary of State for Public Education in Mexico from 1921 to 1924, he used his ministerial position to implement an educational and cultural policy for Mexico, the effect of which was to facilitate and set in motion, through the auspices of the state, a tide of intellectual and artistic creativity that was to give Mexico a special prominence in the modern culture of the twentieth century.

In 1915 Vasconcelos joined the provisional government of Eulalio Gutiérrez as Secretary of Education. In 1920, under the administration of General Alvaro Obregón, he was made Rector of the National University in Mexico City. In his inaugural address, he announced that he had come as a delegate of the

20 Architects, painters and sculptors should not work with an exhibition or a degree in mind, but rather to make or decorate a building. . . . Reform must come at the same time in the political, administrative, military and artistic orders. If in this moment of universal renovation the Mexican artists, pleading the serenity of their sacerdocy, remain inert, refuse to play a conscious virile part in the struggle, if they let others do their job and fail to leaven the national upsurge with the purity of their good will and the thrust of their energy, then the rolling avalanche is sure to leave them behind, in a heap of debris.<sup>21</sup>

Atl therefore not only opposed the academicism of the Academy but also what he termed the asocial character of the Santa Anita School. Both seemed for him in their own ways to deny the presence and impact of the turbulent revolution going on throughout the country outside the walls of these institutions. Atl's radicalism at this time was such that he saw the joining of the art institution to the social and political revolution as a fundamental principle. Indeed, during his time in Paris in 1913 on his second stay in Europe, before returning to Mexico to take up the directorship of the Academy, Atl had founded a magazine entitled *L'Action d'Art* in which he declared that the role of art was to reflect life and act as a determining force in society. In his formal letter of acceptance to the post of Director, Atl wrote that 'It is my intention to definitively reorganize this training establishment, in what I would refer to as its material structure in terms of its teaching methods. I intend to make of the National School of Fine Arts an institution of the most elevated moral character, with exclusively utilitarian ends.'<sup>22</sup>

The foundation of Atl's position was his idea that the artist participate in the revolutionary struggle. The influence of this ideological position was clearly felt when in 1914 he persuaded Siqueiros, Orozco and other Academy students to join with him in supporting Carranza and his constitutionalist army in their evacuation of the capital, and to move to the southern town of Orizaba. There, Atl, who had taken with him most of the printing presses owned by the Academy, set up a propaganda centre in support of Carranza using the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, for which Siqueiros acted as military correspondent and Orozco drew a whole series of biting cartoons and illustrations. Siqueiros later wrote of Atl's influence that 'We owe him the first direct militancy of Mexican artists in the ranks of the revolution . . . It

revolution and that a revolution should now also take place in education. In 1921, Obregón promoted him to Secretary of State for Public Education, giving his ministry more than twice the amount of money previous office holders had had at their disposal.

During Vasconcelos' term of office, books and magazines were published and distributed in their thousands. Those who could scarcely read or write before the revolution were given access to the world of literature through his public education programmes. But his most radical and, at the time, not always popular policy was that of commissioning young Mexican artists to paint murals on the walls of some of the state's most prestigious buildings. 'One of the imperatives of our programme', Vasconcelos said later, 'was to put the public in contact with great artists rather than with mediocrities'.<sup>24</sup> In the mural paintings he commissioned he wanted to see 'An art saturated with primitive vigour, new subject-matter, combining subtlety and the sacrifice of the exquisite to the great, perfection to invention'.<sup>25</sup>

Vasconcelos closely involved the artists who had gathered around him in his extensive building programme. It was not always a popular move but, as he later said, it was his firm conviction that 'many of our present and modest endeavours will be remembered thanks to the painters who have decorated them. Architects should feel elated at their good fortune at working in the midst of an artistic renaissance'.<sup>26</sup>

In the context of Mexico's political upheavals, Vasconcelos' radicalism was quite unlike that of his colleagues and many of the painters he commissioned. As Jean Charlot has observed, Vasconcelos never felt committed to the revolution in the same terms as his fellow reformers. His views were coloured by a philosophy that owed much to his belief in Pythagoras. His book, *Pythagoras, A Theory of Rhythm*, which he wrote in 1915 while in

political exile, proposes the existence of two different conceptual views of reality. On the one hand there is the realm of science and economics, and on the other, the world of art and disinterested contemplation, which is arrived at by intuition. For Vasconcelos, the universe was essentially a musical concept, in which he believed that men were more 'malleable when approached through their senses, as happens when one contemplates beautiful forms and figures, or hears beautiful rhythms and melodies . . . (Pythagoras) decreed that the initiation should be through music, since melodies and rhythms possess therapeutic properties to cure the passions and routines of men'.<sup>27</sup>

Vasconcelos combined cunning and daring with his philosophic idealism, paying little heed to his own political and personal fortunes. In the face of sceptical colleagues and, as often as not, a hostile and uncomprehending public, Vasconcelos camouflaged the commissions that he awarded to painters under more acceptable headings.<sup>28</sup> Siqueiros, for example, was appointed to the position of Eighth Teacher of Drawing and Manual Crafts, with a salary of 3.30 pesos per day, while Jean Charlot recalled that Vasconcelos employed him to assist Diego Rivera on his first mural under the guise of Inspector of Drawing in the Public Schools of Mexico City Transferred to the Jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Education.<sup>29</sup>

Vasconcelos' philosophical position was above all one in which freedom of expression was a principle not to be compromised by the determinations of revolutionary and transient political requirements. As Octavio Paz observed, for this reason Vasconcelos 'imposed no dogmas, either aesthetic or ideological, on the artists'.<sup>30</sup> It was one of the paradoxes of his time that this great philosophical idealist would help bring into being a movement in which the artists would eventually spurn his idealism in favour of a partisan and often didactic art.

