REVOLUTIONARY IMAGES

THREE GREAT MEXICAN MURALISTS TELL A REBEL’S STORY IN THREE DIFFERENT WAYS

The revolution that took place in Mexico during the early 20th century brought chaos and violence to that country. But it also inspired the talents of three of the century’s most important visual artists.

Ever since Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, the country had been in turmoil. The latest civil war—called the Mexican Revolution (1910–20)—had just ended, and the current leaders wanted to calm and reassure a terrified population. To do this and to explain the revolution’s meaning, in 1921 the government began commissioning Mexican painters to create huge murals in public places.

The most important of these artists were Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco (O-ROWS-ko), and David Siqueiros (SEE-KER-os). Each had his own idea of what had happened during the revolution, and strong feelings as to whether it was good or bad.

Emiliano Zapata (Emil-YANO Za-PA-ta) was a leader who was killed during the war. He was a hero to some, a violent revolutionary to others. Because he had become such a powerful symbol of the revolution, Zapata was the subject of many important murals. He is seen very differently in each of the works shown here.

Diego Rivera, considered the leader of the muralist movement, believed in the revolution. He wanted his art to explain what he felt had taken place during the struggle. Rivera also wanted to encourage the Mexican people to take pride in their heritage. In his portrait of Zapata (opposite page, bottom), Rivera uses the kind of flattened, stylized figures with masklike faces set in shallow spaces that can be seen in ancient pre-Columbian art. Zapata and his supporters are dressed in white and carry farm tools. The soft lighting, muted colors, and simplified overlapping shapes in this work describe a scene that is anything but warlike. Defined by curved organic outlines, these idealized citizens-soldiers stand firm. Grasping his sugarcane-cutter’s knife and the white horse he has taken from the enemy, Rivera’s Zapata seems determined to do anything for the good of his people.

José Clemente Orozco also painted Zapata, but his version (opposite page, top right) is very different from Rivera’s. Seen from a low point-of-view, the revolutionary leader’s dark silhouetted shape is framed in the doorway of a small peasant hut. He looms high in the background, casting a shadow over the frightened people in the foreground. Zapata’s static, expressionless figure stands in stark contrast to the thrashing, intersecting diagonals and fragments.

* Before the first European landings at the end of the 15th century
How is Mexican revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata being presented in each of these three scenes? Does he seem like a hero... or a villain?

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This fresco (a mural painted on fresh plaster) by Diego Rivera shows the various groups of artists and workers involved in the building of a modern city.


“I WANT MY MURALS TO REFLECT THE LIFE OF THE MEXICAN PEOPLE, AS IT WAS AND IS NOW.”

—DIEGO RIVERA

There are many ways to tell a visual story, and Mexican muralist Diego Rivera used a number of them. One method of storytelling is to divide the narrative into separate self-contained panels, like those in a comic book or a graphic novel. Rivera did this in his work The Making of a Fresco (cover and above) at the San Francisco Art Institute. Rather than presenting a series of events that happen over time, the panels are related to one another by subject. Each section shows a different kind of laborer—construction workers, engineers, architects—all working on the same project at the same time. And the whole mural is tied together by the very realistic-looking painted scaffold. It seems to cover the mural, framing and focusing attention on the artists in the center. They are “painting” a mural within the larger mural, the subject of which is a giant standing worker dressed in blue. Located in the exact center of the symmetrical composition is the larger mural’s focal point, the artist himself.

Diego Rivera, considered by many to be the most important of the Mexican muralists, was a large man with equally grand opinions. It was typical of him to turn his back on his critics, as literally he does in the work above. Rivera, the son of two schoolteachers, was born in 1886 in a small mining town. He went to art school in Mexico City and at 19 was awarded a government travel grant. He studied for several years in Europe, where he admired the 16th-century frescos of artists such as Leonardo da Vinci (see pages 12–13). When he returned to Mexico in 1921, Rivera combined the realism and scale of Renaissance figures with pre-Columbian subjects and styles. The artist wanted his art to idealize the ordinary Mexican people and to celebrate their Indian heritage. Later, Rivera married artist Frida Kahlo and became part of a group of artists, writers, and politicians who helped shape Mexican culture in the 1930s and 1940s.

One of Rivera’s major projects was a series of wall murals (opposite page, top) painted in Mexico City’s National Palace. In this detail, two groups of native peoples meet in order to trade. This visual story can be read something like a book. Beginning with the group on the left, the viewer’s eye progresses horizontally across the
foreground, from detail to overlapping detail. It moves past the masked Aztec priest to the emblems carried by the group on the right. The viewer's attention then moves up the diagonals formed by the spears to the dancing figures in the middle ground, finally focusing on the giant triangular pyramid in the background.

Because murals are actually part of a building's architecture, they tell their visual stories in a physically involving way. Many of Rivera's murals in the National Palace wind up staircases, burst around corners, or are tucked into closets. In this small painting (near left), a circular window has become the center of a blazing sun. The natural sunlight coming through the window heightens the impact of the painted sun around it. Its light shines down on the vertical rows of corn being fertilized by the horizontal bodies of two dead revolutionaries.

In the works of Mexican muralists such as Rivera, nearly everything—including the seasons, the cycles of nature, even life and death—relates directly to the Mexican Revolution. Rivera was at work on another mural series based on the revolution when he died in 1957.
"I WANT THE VIEWER AND MY WORK TO BECOME ONE AND THE SAME."
—DAVID SIQUEIROS

DAVID SIQUEIROS
Breaking Boundaries

The youngest and most radical of the Mexican muralists was David Alfaro Siqueiros. He thought that a mural was not just an image to be painted on a wall; it had to be incorporated with the character of the building. Siqueiros wanted to create an interactive environment that would surround the onlooker and make the viewer a part of the mural.

Siqueiros was born in 1896 into a well-to-do and cultured family. His mother was a poet, his father a lawyer. As a teenager, he took classes with Orozco until the Mexican Revolution interrupted his studies. He joined the army, and that experience caused him to begin viewing art as a means of social change. After the revolution ended, he, Rivera, and Orozco began painting the vast series of...
murals that later would become world-famous.

Siqueiros's art was a direct result of his political beliefs. He was an activist, protester, union official, and strike organizer—activities that frequently resulted in jail sentences. The artist wanted the viewer to be as involved in his political convictions as he was.

One of Siqueiros's best-known murals (above) is in a palace outside Mexico City. The artist partially knocked down a wall between two rooms so his mural would protrude into the viewer's space. The story, executed in multiple changing perspective, alters as the visitor moves from right to left. It starts with the 1906 miners' strike that began the revolution. Stylized, expressionless, diagonal figures defined by multiple, parallel "lines of force" re-create the feeling of a crowd surging forward.

As the observer moves left, the strikers gradually dissolve into life-size, vertical revolutionaries who appear to march toward the viewer. When the spectator passes the shallow wall dividing the space, the perspective changes again. Now the focus is on a single larger-than-life horseman who symbolizes the power of the people. Distorted diagonals bring him to an abrupt halt, stopped by government forces. To his left are the casualties of dictatorship, the repetitive horizontal line of fallen revolutionary heroes. Siqueiros's use of extreme angles, sweeping diagonals, and vivid colors also helps to convey the artist's urgent desire for political reform.

In addition to his gigantic formats and unusual presentations, Siqueiros used other devices that were considered radical at the time. He worked with industrial paints, plastics, spray guns, and photomontage. He was also interested in the photographic techniques used in the new art of motion pictures. In his self-portrait (opposite page, below), he has presented himself in extreme close-up. His right arm forms a dramatic diagonal that runs from one corner of the picture almost to the other. His hand is in sharp focus and also is radically foreshortened (much larger in scale, so it appears three-dimensional). The artist has even put a thick texture of paint on his fingernails to increase the sense of reality and heighten his connection with the viewer.

Siqueiros continued to engage in radical activities and to create images that supported his political beliefs. When he died in 1974, a fellow artist described him as "a great Mexican monument, as titanic as his paintings."
While Diego Rivera painted the Mexican Revolution as a heroic epic, David Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco painted the reality of war. Born in 1883, Orozco studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Mexico City. When he was 17, the artist lost his right hand and part of his vision in a laboratory accident. Orozco was politically active during the revolution, and saw many of its horrors firsthand.

To tell his stories, Orozco has abandoned the logical progression and perspective (a system for representing deep space realistically) that Rivera and Siqueiros used to tell their visual stories. Instead, he chose key moments in Mexico's history—ones he believed represented the country's essence.

In this mural (right) painted on the walls of the Government Palace, popular hero Father Miguel Hidalgo (ee-DAL-go) urges the native people to rise up against their Spanish conquerors. The priest is the center of the radial composition; all the other figures spiral out from this focal point. In this work Orozco uses distortion, juxtaposition, and scale changes to create a nightmarish effect. The twisting diagonals seen in the tortured figures, the dark earth colors, and the slashing brushstrokes echo the conditions under which most Mexican people lived in the early 19th century. The turbulent outer edges of the work are in sharp contrast to its center. Father Hidalgo's more realistically painted portrait is a visual symbol of reason and calm.

In his later years, Orozco became a national hero, recognized as an outstanding Mexican figure in the arts and sciences. The artist died in 1949.

Father Hidalgo, a symbol of Mexican independence, is considered a spiritual leader of the Mexican Revolution.

Orozco planned compositions like this one as part of a sequence. Each succeeding chapter was painted on most surfaces (top, right) of an entire building.


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"A PAINTING SHOULD NOT BE A COMMENTARY, BUT THE FACT ITSELF."
—JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO
STORIES FOR THE PEOPLE

THREE MURALISTS SHARE VISUAL STORIES WITH THEIR COMMUNITIES

“MAKING A MURAL IS LIKE A BIG MOVIE PRODUCTION—IT CAN INVOLVE 20 SETS OF SCAFFOLDINGS, 4 TRUCKS, AND FOOD FOR 50 PEOPLE.” —JUDY BACA

TALES OF UNITY

Mexican-American artist Judy Baca worked with the community of Durango, Colorado, to create the mural above. The work is about the relationships between the town’s Native American Ute tribe and its Mexican and Caucasian residents, and the way in which they all interact with the land around them. To create this digital composition, Baca collaged historical images of the town, family album photos, and student drawings, and added her own painted images. The symbolic Ute “circle of life” in the center connects all the elements. The styles the artist employs are as diverse as her subjects. She uses multiple changing perspectives, overviews, close-ups, and many different scales. The viewer’s gaze moves from the Ute mother and child (whose triangular form echoes the mountain) in the background to the figures in the middle ground to the close-up of a cowboy in the foreground.
"MY INTENTION IS TO PORTRAY WHAT IS INTRINSICALLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN." —JOHN BIGGERS

STORIES OF PRIDE

African-American painter John Biggers's mural depicts the important role women have played in African-American history. Like Orozco, Biggers has abandoned realism and conventional perspective. He has chosen to tell his visual story by weaving together many separate events. The work's focal point in the center is a slave who is framed by the intersecting diagonals of two structures. His strength and labor support both. He leans against the thriving "Tree of Life," which nurtures his people still in bondage on the left. The limb behind his head has been cut off and replaced by a plantation column symbolizing slavery. On the right, the great leader Harriet Tubman (c. 1820–1913) is seen from a low point of view as she guides a line of overlapping repeated figures to freedom. The symbolic "Torch of Freedom" that she carries topples the column. Biggers uses multiple perspectives and vanishing points in order to juxtapose many stories within a single composition.

"ART CAN TURN AN INVASIVE STRUCTURE INTO A GALLERY OF FREE SPEECH." —BANKSY

STATEMENTS OF SEPARATION

What story do you think this mural created by contemporary British street artist Banksy is telling? Does the answer become clearer when you learn that it was painted on a 425-mile-long wall that separates two opposing groups, Israelis and Palestinians? This provocative image juxtaposes two very different painting styles. Stenciled on the wall, the stylized forms of children appear to be playing with buckets and shovels on top of a pile of rubble that looks like sand. Above them, a giant hole, seemingly blasted through the wall, reveals a beautiful sun-drenched beach with palm trees and gentle waves. The island paradise is depicted with photographically realistic detail. The bright blues and greens provide an almost shocking contrast to the drab neutral tones of the concrete wall. By presenting a symbolic image of escape, Banksy's mural makes a moving comment on the tense political situation in the Middle East.

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