

Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism 1910–1950—a significant exhibition

By Gary Alvernia
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Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910–1950 *presented at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia October 25, 2016 to January 8, 2017 and currently at the Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City until May 7, 2017.*

The product of a major collaboration between the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMoA) and Mexico’s Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts), “Paint the Revolution” was the first exhibit in nearly seven decades to present an extensive selection of 20th century Mexican art in the United States.

Encompassing the start of the Mexican Revolution through to just after the end of World War II, the exhibition includes and prominently displays the works of the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera (1886–1957), Jose Clemente Orozco (1883–1949), and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1977), along with Rivera’s wife and artistic collaborator, Frida Kahlo (1907–1954). It also features a number of lesser-known muralists and painters, as well as photographers Tina Modotti (1896–1942) and Manuel Alvarez Bravo (1902–2002).

PMoA’s aim in staging “Paint the Revolution,” it said, was to provide “a deep look at the forces that shaped modern art in Mexico, the progress of which was closely watched around the world.” The exhibit reveals the changes that occurred in Mexican artwork, in style and format but also content, during this period. Though primarily depicting the artistic impact of the Mexican Revolution (c. 1910–1921), other crucial historical events—the two World Wars, Great Depression, industrialization of Mexico and the Russian Revolution—are also considered.

PMoA made great efforts to bring together a number of previously unseen and otherwise inaccessible artworks. One noteworthy element involved the use of large-screen panels and projectors to digitally render in high resolution some of the enormous frescoes by Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, which could not be moved physically from their current locations.

“Paint the Revolution” is arranged in a chronological and categorical format with various pieces placed according to different themes—the Mexican Revolution, Urbanization, Mexican Culture, etc.—and then presented sequentially by date of completion, allowing the audience to see the evolution of Mexican artwork over the time period in question.

From the outset, the exhibit explains how a number of Mexican artists, at the turn of the 20th century, began to look to their own country for inspiration and strove to create a national aesthetic style, which they referred to as *Mexicanidad*. While many trained in Europe, these artists eschewed classical subject matter and increasingly took an interest in the culture and daily lives of peasants and workers. Initially taking the form of romantic portrayals of rural life and landscapes, artistic work became increasingly realistic, with an emphasis on urban life, industrialization and political struggle, under the impact of the politically charged climate during and after the Mexican Revolution.

Taking place from 1910–1921, the revolution was a period of struggle and armed insurrection by the country’s peasantry and working class

against the big landowners, represented by the anti-democratic regime of Porfirio Diaz. Suffering under brutally exploitative conditions, driven by the Mexican elite’s subservience to foreign investment from the United States and Europe, the impoverished and increasingly landless peasants formed great armies under the leadership of Francisco “Pancho” Villa, and Emiliano Zapata, while the workers launched massive general strikes that crippled Mexico’s economy (for a full description see here).

Despite overthrowing Diaz and the enormous levels of determination and self-sacrifice shown by the masses, the lack of revolutionary leadership resulted in defeat. The liberal bourgeoisie, initially allied with the Villa and Zapata, betrayed the masses, and led by Alvaro Obregon, brutally crushed the rebellions. The result was the murder of hundreds of thousands of workers and peasants and the preservation of bourgeois rule.

For substantial layers of the Mexican intelligentsia the conflict served to heighten their political sensitivity and consciousness. Lacking much of the idyllic romanticism of the pre-revolutionary era, paintings like *Hanged and Disembodied Men* (1915), by Francisco Goitia, which depicts long-decayed corpses hung on trees, effectively conveyed the nature of war. In a simple but effective manner, Goitia, who became a “cultural attaché” to Villa’s army and witnessed its eventual defeat, exposes the human toll of war and the indifference of such catastrophes to the fate of its victims, a true accounting of warfare.

World War I and revolutionary aspirations generated by the 1917 Russian Revolution and establishment of the first workers’ state also contributed greatly to this artistic development. After Alvaro Obregon became Mexican president following the revolution, he announced a program of state-sponsored murals, providing a platform for the increasingly combative and politicized artistic community. Championed by Jose Vasconcelos, Obregon’s secretary for education, the internationally influential Mexican mural movement found its genesis in this program. The exhibition, however, does not refer to Vasconcelos, an active participant in the Mexican Revolution and one strongly affected by the concepts that inspired *Mexicanidad*.

While intended mainly to foster a sense of national identity, murals were seen by many artists as an opportunity to communicate directly with the working class and raise their revolutionary consciousness, a goal undoubtedly inspired by the October Revolution and the development of art in the Soviet Union in the years immediately following its creation. Indeed, many Mexican artists would visit the USSR and become members of the Mexican Communist Party. Diego Rivera (the most advanced politically of the Mexican muralists), in particular, developed a close friendship and collaboration with Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Bolshevik Party. Their political relationship is not alluded to in the exhibit.

The radicalization of Mexican artists led to the creation of powerful and engaging works that expressed the faith of the artistic community in the revolution of the masses. One moving example is expressed in Rivera’s fresco *Liberation of the Peon* (1931) which depicts the freeing of a

tortured and badly beaten indentured laborer (who were often indigenous peoples) on a plantation by revolutionary soldiers.

An additional impact of the October Revolution was that it encouraged Mexican artists to adopt an international outlook. Unsurprisingly many directed a critical eye towards the imperialist oppressors of Mexico, particularly the United States. The museum presents the paintings of Rivera, Kahlo and Orozco, all of whom came away from their visits to the US with critical and insightful views of America in the Great Depression.

Kahlo was scathing in her criticism of American society, an attitude seen in her work *My Dress Hangs There* which mocked the superficiality of American capitalism and its narrow obsession with possessions and self-promotion (demonstrated by the placing of the indoor toilet and a bronze trophy on equal pedestals).

Orozco's *The Epic of American Civilization*, effectively condenses millennia of human settlement in the New World into one enormous 24-panel panoramic mural, which was presented digitally at the exhibit. Considering the broad subject at hand, this reviewer was struck both by the sweeping ambition of the project and the range of emotion and feeling embodied in each panel. Defiance, hope, and despair emanate from the piece, and the immense scope driving Mexican modernism expresses itself with a power rarely reached in artwork. It is impossible to miss the connection between political outlook and artistic criticism here.

The presentation to American audiences of some of the great works of art created in early 20th century Mexico is a commendable undertaking. The PMoA exhibit emphasized the politically critical and in some cases anti-capitalist nature of the art works and artists themselves, drawing a connection between the content of the art and historical events of that era. Efforts were also made to highlight the contributions that Mexican artists made to artistic and cultural developments internationally.

A number of tour guides commented that some of the works acted as a counter to the xenophobic campaign directed against Mexicans by the US government and media. Additionally, in listening to the conversations between various audience members, one could hear many discussing the oppositional nature of the artwork and the present situation in the United States, particularly in regards to the rise of Donald Trump. Others commented that the situation leading to the Mexican Revolution paralleled the enormous wealth inequalities and repression facing American workers today. While these sentiments reflect an important strength of "Paint the Revolution" which bring to wider attention a number of politically charged and relevant artworks, the show has its weaknesses.

The exhibit attempts to reveal the relationship between historical events and the development of socially conscious artwork, but there is a lack of analysis of that very history. The political activities and trajectories of the artists, so crucial to understanding their work, are only given a cursory review. We are told that Mexico produced artists with an anti-capitalist outlook, but nothing further. The Mexican Revolution is described as a conflict by the impoverished masses against the rich but with little detail provided about the event itself or the class forces involved. While an artistic exhibit will necessarily be limited in how much history and politics it can present, these omissions weaken the context of the material presented. This limitation above all stems from a failure to discuss the fate of the Soviet Union in any detail, specifically the rise of Stalinism and its impact on Mexican artists and cultural life.

The 1917 October Revolution under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky was based on an internationalist and socialist perspective, but the failure of the German revolutions in 1918–19 and 1923 isolated the Soviet workers' state and—combined with the terrible backwardness inherited from tsarist Russia—resulted in the emergence of a nationalist bureaucracy headed by Joseph Stalin that claimed socialism could be constructed solely within the USSR.

While Trotsky and the Left Opposition conducted a determined struggle

for internationalism and against the nationalist policies of the Soviet bureaucracy, the victory of Stalinism had a tragic impact on the political trajectory of millions of workers and intellectuals. Stalinism destroyed the Marxist leadership and culture that inspired the revolution in Russia, with disastrous consequences for the working class internationally.

Many artists and intellectuals were disorientated by Stalinism, falsely believing that the Soviet bureaucracy represented the continuity of the revolution, and subordinated themselves to the regime, blindly following its orders. Mexico was not spared from this process, with its artistic community entangled in the struggle.

A few principled artists like Rivera and Kahlo defended Trotsky. Rivera was centrally involved in securing Trotsky's right to exile in Mexico, petitioning the Mexican government to offer him refuge from the Stalinist regime. David Siqueiros, on the other hand, became a virulent Stalinist and on the orders of the Stalinist secret police and the Mexican Communist Party led the first assassination attempt against Trotsky at Coyoacán, Mexico City—a machine-gun attack—in May 1940.

Siqueiros espoused the Stalinist perspective on art, perversely known as socialist realism. Designed to reduce the revolutionary consciousness of workers, it considered artwork legitimate only insofar as it glorified the viewpoints and actions of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Art that depicted topics unfavorable or inconvenient to the bureaucracy was labelled as "elitist" or "bourgeois" and so-called "proletarian art"—which excluded the entire preceding cultural and artistic traditions of human society—demanded in its place.

Rivera, an early member of the Communist Party, rejected these reactionary limitations. He came into conflict with this perspective during a visit to the Soviet Union in 1926 and was told to return to Mexico. Siqueiros and the Mexican CP later denounced Rivera as "bourgeois" and an "agent of North American imperialism" for accepting commissions for murals in the US, and then bitterly attacked him for supporting Trotsky.

With the encouragement of the Mexican CP, socialist realist and nationalist tendencies became more pronounced in the artistic works of that country. The retrogression that resulted meant that Mexican modernist art was unable to truly break free of a nation-centric view—its *Mexicanidad*.

Rivera's trajectory perhaps best captures the impact of the October Revolution and its subsequent betrayal by Stalinism. At his best, Rivera was a truly revolutionary artist, whose paintings and enormous frescoes captured the life and struggles of the working class. Trotsky wrote highly of Rivera, describing him in an article as the greatest interpreter of the October Revolution in the field of painting. In 1938 Rivera would collaborate with Trotsky and French writer Andre Breton to write the "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art," which stressed the connection between artwork and revolutionary consciousness.

Nevertheless, Rivera, who while principled had not grasped the significance of the struggle against Stalinism, became politically disorientated following the assassination of Trotsky in Mexico on August 20, 1940 by the Stalinist agent Ramón Mercader. Rivera made several unsuccessful attempts to rejoin the Mexican CP during the 1940s and was eventually readmitted in 1954, three years before he died of cancer in 1957. This sort of confusion and demoralization characterized many in the Mexican artistic community during WWII and the post-war boom.

These key historical details, which would have further enlightened audiences to the gravity of political conflicts of the 20th century and their connection with art, are sadly not to be found in the exhibit.

These limitations, while significant, do not lessen the value of the exhibit, and should it spark a renewed interest in Mexican modernist art, "Paint the Revolution" will have provided an important service.

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