

FORTHCOMING

Walter Gropius, former director of the Bauhaus, and now at the Harvard School of Architecture, discusses ways and means of establishing a common vocabulary for all contemporary designers. He calls his article "Topics of Design."

"The Followers of William Blake," by Robin Ironside. A study of the influence of the personality and art of the mystic poet-painter.

In her concluding article, Elizabeth McCausland brings her history of Cooper Union down to the present.

"Charles Wimar" by Perry Rathbone. A short biography of one of the most interesting and least known among the early painters of the American Indian.

"The Space-Time Concept in the Work of Picasso," by Paul Laporte. An analysis of the visual structure of Picasso's art in relation to contemporary modes of scientific thinking. Mr. Laporte draws revealing analogies between the scientific and artistic ways of viewing our universe.

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MAGAZINE OF ART

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José Clemente Orozco, THE WOUNDED SOLDIER, oil, Collection Mrs. Alma Reed.

JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO

BY JEAN CHARLOT

IN an epoch when hearts were stouter, or purer, than now, Flemish justices saw fit to decorate their courts with murals warning of the dire punishments meted once to unjust judges. A favorite was the story of the magistrate who was skinned alive, and his pelt used to upholster the judicial bench. When José Clemente Orozco was commissioned to decorate the Supreme Court Building of Mexico City, had he known this anecdote he would have rejected it as too mild. As it stands, his painting is more disquieting than the ancient ones, being a sweeping indictment of all human justice rather than that of a single scoundrel. To the doubtful enjoyment of Mexican judges, who must pass the murals every day on their way to court, Orozco chose literally to broil human lawmakers and justice dispensers on a set of divine spits.

The walls are painted in a kind of *buon fresco* pressed into the service of untried ends by a powerful and esthetically lawless personality. Orozco's technique has only its chemistry in common with the delicate washes of ancient Italian frescoes so blanched by the centuries as to meet spinsterish tastes. His come closer to the opaque, lime-thick Slav murals; and the modelings, contrasting dynamically active hatchings of black and white, could be a muscular free-hand adaptation of the delicate webs of gold that highlight the veils of Byzantine Madonnas. But the little that remains of the routine wisdom of ancient recipes is done violence to by sustained improvisation. Seen at arm's length, the disjointed brushstrokes are only a puzzling giant calligraphy. A far greater distance is needed before the walls are ready to disgorge their searing message.

As to subject matter, compact diagonal columns of Heaven-sent fire are the one flaming accent in an otherwise colorless world, conjured mostly with moss green and corpse gray. A timid, vitiated echo of this burning red are the Phrygian caps with which respectable-looking, masked bandits attempt in vain to deflect the well-aimed lightnings. Massive bookshelves, raised like skeletal skyscrapers and shaken by the attendant earthquake, pour out books and stacks of legal documents as if they were wounded innards. On a high pedestal in front of a tottering, half-split palace of justice, Justice herself lolls through the conflagration, sword and neck limp, snoring mouth agape. A giant empty closet opens, and before its disclosed vacuum a kitchen table parades as a legal bench. The Chair, stuffy with plush and gaudy with gold, lies upset, buried in a mounting sea of notaried papers curled by the flames. The inhabitants of this, Orozco's private planet, hide their judicial features behind safecrackers' kerchiefs, weigh false the scales of justice, pronounce loaded decisions, or, less subtly, sock and bind poor adolescent orphans, gag and rope night watchmen, stuff a hastily picked loot inside bulging knotted sheets.

One of Orozco's latest mural ensembles, this one, like the others, has the power to irritate layman and art critic alike. The former resents the indecency latent in the totally unabashed exposure of romantic inspiration, fears the nugget of truth incipient in the gross indictment. The latter, whose delight it is

to burrow a sniffing way under the surface of an art work and retrieve with canine fidelity what influences, trends, and comparisons hide in there, is stopped still in his tracks by an originality not yet catalogued in history.

José Clemente Orozco was born in 1882, in Zapotlan, State of Jalisco. His family mapped for him a career as an agronomist, and the willing youngster went to the Capital and won a diploma of agricultural engineer after three hard years at the *Escuela de Agricultura de San Jacinto*, D.F.

Six years later Orozco, deciding belatedly for an artistic career, entered the Fine Arts School of San Carlos, sitting in class with moppets of seventeen. The art academy was a forbidding place, its courses devised as an elaborate set of rungs and traps to smoothen to academic polish whatever individual asperities were the initial lot of the student. Orozco remained Orozco, yet remembers with gratitude the conventional grind that forced him to take stock of his innate mastery. After having drawn from the cast and from lithographic prints his share of noses, toes, and ears, he was admitted to life class. An elaborate stand could rotate the model, or raise her to successive levels, bathed in alternating layers of diffused and reflected lights by a panoply of bulbs and screens. Each pose lasted a month, and a photographer was called in to take a picture, against which paragon the students could correct deviations from nature in their drawings.

The academy was only the quieter half of Orozco's art education, important inasmuch as a thorough knowledge of perspective and anatomy was the one safe way eventually to throw both overboard. More easily traceable in his present work is the other broader lesson that he gathered from the many sights of Mexico City, either taken in the raw, for which Orozco already showed a fondness, or transmuted, digested into an esthetic alloy by the masterly burin of the popular engraver, José Guadalupe Posada.

Retailed by street peddlers, each one of Posada's four thousand prints illustrated some paroxysm of passion meant to smoke the penny out of the poor-man's knotted kerchief. Sophisticates and the well-bred turned their noses up at his art in disdain. His street gazettes, gaudy color sheets, ghastly depictions of horrendous crimes, emotional renderings of passionate adventures, gave Orozco a feeling of delight as acute as was the tug at the heartstrings of the servant girls who were Posada's constant buyers. To this day, Orozco shares in the older man's esthetic philosophy that rated emotion above craft, cared little for the delicate balancings of abstract art and much for the intricacies of the human heart.

It is through Mexican folk customs and folk art that the idea of death is so forcefully incarnated in Orozco's work. Each year, on the Day of the Dead, Posada published a contemporary Dance of Death, where the powerful, the wealthy, the beautiful, the schemer, the soldier, the murderer, his victim, and the just plain poor met on equal footing, dined and wined in harmony, at last equalized further than fripperies down to their biological common denominator, the skeleton.

Orozco's further esthetic training spans in time the bloodiest era of the armed Revolution. The harsh, unartistic succession

AFTER TWO YEARS IN MEXICO CITY WORKING ON A HISTORY OF THE MEXICAN RENAISSANCE, CHARLOT IS TEACHING AT COLORADO SPRINGS.



BORDELLO SCENE, ca. 1913, oil on paper. Collection Dr. Carillo.

of political and military facts supplemented with its quota of lead and iron the still knowledge gathered at the academy and the romancing of penny sheets. The unseating and exile of Dictator Diaz, the enshrining of Madero as Savior and President, the uprising of Felix Diaz, backed by artillery belching its shells on the Capital, the treason of Huerta, Madero's assassination, the comeuppance of Huerta tumbling from the Presidential chair to a sick cot in a United States jail, the royal battle between Carranza, Zapata, and Villa, the whole newsreel with its obligato of sluggings, lootings, shootings, rape, and arson, is the paradoxical background against which the delicate unfurling of Orozco's adolescent genius asserted itself.

Poet José Juan Tablada recorded in 1913 a visit to the painter's lodgings: "The studio was a small room furnished with what accessories are indispensable to working and living, an easel, a table for colors, a bed, a washstand. On the walls and in portfolios the watercolors, pastels and drawings that are up to now the whole work of Orozco. . . . Woman is the perpetual theme of all these works. . . . Young women meet and kiss endearingly, furtive looks and affected gestures rehearse nascent perfidies, weapons are being assayed and sharpened for the coming duels of passion. . . . It is with reluctance that I close the portfolio of Claudines, with a last look at childish heads made larger by the coquettish note of a bow of ribbon, at bodies where sveltnesses and plenitudes express a first try at the mature form."

It is true that, if his watercolors of schoolgirls were all tenderness, Orozco was already sharpening boar-sized tusks in another genre. His Rabelaisian and Falstaffian cartoons, printed by successive opposition sheets, hounded impartially whichever man happened to sit in the Presidential chair, up to his custo-

marily violent unseating. Another set of early works is the series of bordello scenes, midway between the tenderness that informs his sketches of schoolgirls and the tiger claw with which he lunged at the powerful.

Orozco came late to mural painting, close to forty, and possessed of a strong personal style. Newspaper cartooning, with its deadlines to wit and quick-faded political allusions, water colors of gestures and postures surprised with a snapshot eye keyed to translate emotion into plastic play acting, were up to then his trade-mark. They contrasted sharply with the manner of his fellow muralists, come to walls via cubism. The cubist treated each easel picture as an architecture, built in patiently from the initial rectangle of the canvas, with a faith amounting to fetishism in its four straight angles and four straight lines. When cubist Diego Rivera turned muralist he did not have to change his point of view, only the scale of his doings. Even the muralist's scaffold proposed a well-known theme: verticals and horizontals and diagonals ordered as rigidly by function as a Juan Gris by logic. Instead of the somewhat meager postulate of the rectangular canvas, complex Mexican colonial architecture offered more intricate canons, but the geometric principle remained the norm.

Orozco had never been to Paris, had not experienced Parisian training, could not validly lean in his mural work against the architectural tenets that ruled the modern art of the 'twenties. As is true of his whole life, neither was he eager to learn, being somewhat skeptical of what his colleagues erected with a great show of giant compasses and the stretching of chalked strings in lieu of giant rulers.

When Rivera unveiled his first mural in March, 1923, Orozco wrote pertly, "Some verses are spelled very nicely and polished magnificently, yet they are worth a peanut. Some paintings boast of the golden proportions and that famous cubistic technique, they are worth another peanut."

Discounting the flippant wording, the comparison between painting and poetry comes naturally to Orozco at a time when the more advanced critics and painters preferred to compare painting to scientific endeavours. To his Paris-anointed colleagues his romantic approach seemed a provincial flaw. And yet the quota of Parisian fashion present in some of those other Mexican murals dates them as of the first third of the twentieth century, while the frescoes that Orozco painted at the same time escape dating, so subjectively engrossed was he as to be impervious to the chant of the cubist siren.

The negative creed quoted in front of a Rivera is soon complemented by a positive one. Writes Orozco, on the eve of beginning his career as a muralist (June, 1923): "My one theme is HUMANITY; my one tendency is EMOTION TO A MAXIMUM; my means the REAL and INTEGRAL representation of bodies, in themselves and in their interrelation."

So severely noble is this program as to seem incapable of human fulfilment; or let us say that Orozco, the budding muralist, installs himself guilelessly in Michelangelo's private pew.

In his first frescoes painted in 1923-24, now mostly destroyed, the artist elaborated on this statement. The human body was their one subject-matter, stripped of racial tags, stripped of clothing, stripped even of those nondescript drapes that classical masters were too prudent to shun. "Time, the present," was waved aside as just another pettiness. Landscape and accessories were X-ed out.

In this first set of murals, Orozco took progressive stock of the possibilities of *buon fresco*, of the requirements of public



CORPSE, 1943, conte crayon and frottage. Collection Dr. Carillo. plastic elocution, and deepened as well his philosophical slant on the world. With great conscience, he would scrape one morning what he had done the day before, rework entire panels to insure the paroxysm of emotion that was his avowed aim. The more expressive of his thoughts, the more did the frescoes run counter to what college students should believe of life.

A morning in June, 1924, one year after Orozco had turned muralist, a mob of students armed with rotten eggs, sticks, and stones, assaulted and defaced the *Preparatoria* murals. Public opinion was largely with them. The newspapers, and even the critics, excused the gangling iconoclasts on the ground that they were "lovers of the beautiful driven to fury by the sight of these monsters." To make sure that such outrage would not be repeated, an indignant government official dismissed the painter and talked of pouring whitewash over the unfinished murals. Now past forty, Orozco sought once again his livelihood in newspaper cartooning.

From this forced interlude in his government-sponsored work dates the mural that he entitled "Omniscience," painted for a private patron, Don Francisco Sergio Iturbe, owner of the ancient and beautiful *Casa de los Azulejos*. The climax of his classical period, it is also an important statement on esthetics. It complements with forms what the artist had already said in words, "Art is before all GRACE. Where GRACE is not, there is no art. GRACE cannot be conjured by so-called cubistic recipes." The core of this saying is a belief in old-fashioned inspiration

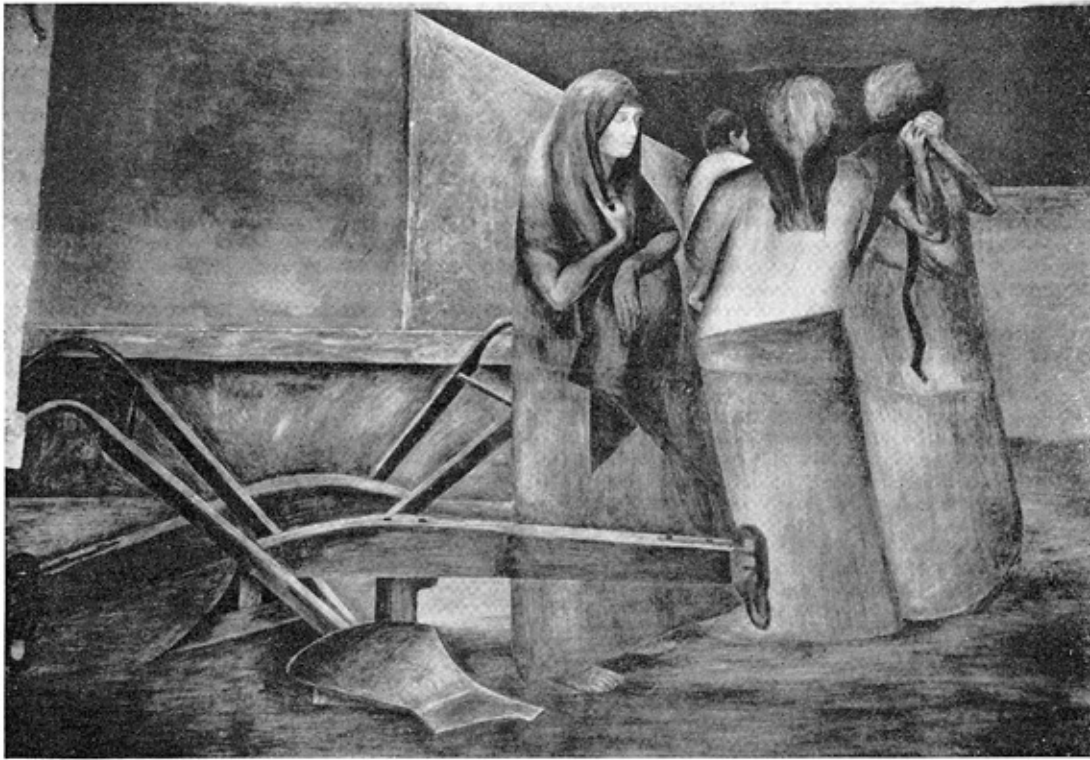
to be mastered only by spiritual experience. In the fresco, Grace, with commanding gesture, orders both Force and Intelligence, while her upturned face receives in turn the upper light. Her expression implies the medium's state of passive expectancy, suggests that all effort to press a conscious logic upon the work in gestation can only injure those imponderables more vital to art than articulate laws.

The series of wash drawings on revolutionary themes, more usually dated 1913-17, were drawn between 1926 and 1928. Critics who assume that this well-known series is contemporary with the events depicted, discount both the working habits and the mood of the artist. At the opposite pole from the Impressionist painter hunting for a motif and bagging it on the spot, Orozco needs turn his back on the model to see it clearly. This unphotographic strain made him paint delicate water colors with woman for a theme while the revolution staged before his eyes its bloodiest tableaux. Now, with peaceful reconstruction deemed just around the corner, while politics exchanged pistol holsters for fountain pens, and their horses for swivel chairs, Orozco's paradoxical retina chose to relieve in brusque black and white the colorful episodes of an earlier decade.

In 1926, Orozco returned to the Preparatory School to finish its decoration. In a chastened mood, he abandoned the gigantic scale that he affected as a mural beginner, cast aside an earlier pride in craftsmanship and anatomical display. Instead of relishing godlike nudity, Orozco's men now keep their shirts on. Once swollen torsos exhale their lungful of pride and cave in. The shrunken heroes go through valiant motions, strike, revolt, kill, and die, roll up their sleeves for peaceful endeavors, but the gesture lacks reach before, and fruit after, its apparent consummation.

Orozco: Drawing from the model, ca. 1938, charcoal on paper.





THE IDLE LAND, 1926, fresco.
National Preparatory School.

Letting go of accidentals, drawing and palette became audaciously simple. Orozco's only model for this series of murals was the elderly mason that elbowed him day after day on the scaffold. Multiplied, his stout semblance mans a world of gray, vine black, terra rosa, ochre, and bluing blue.

This superb series closes Orozco's first period. Soon after, his artistic innocence suffered severe jolts. Feted in New York, touring Europe, commissioned to paint in Pomona and Dartmouth, the painter now took conscious stock of idiosyncrasies in his work rationally unperceived up to then; paid tribute to Byzantine mosaics and puzzled at the Saxon world. Foreign respect forced recognition at home, where a substantial series of frescoes in Mexico City and Guadalajara round up his *œuvre* to date.

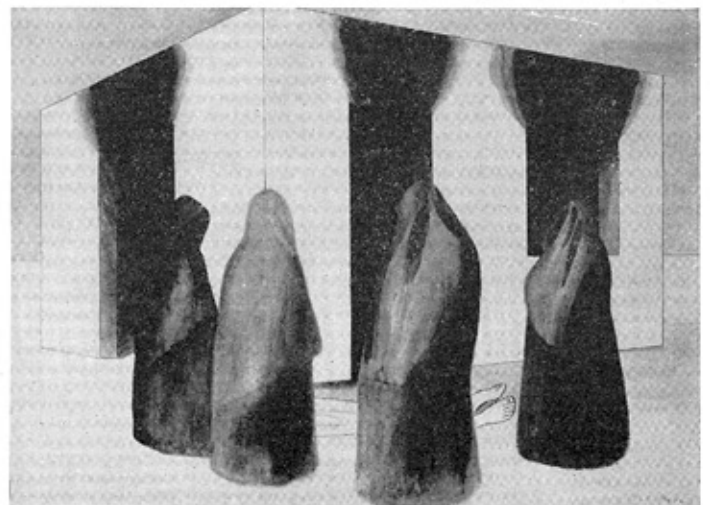
Official approval has at last pinned on Orozco its belated tokens and kudos. By Mexican law, a grand prize of 20,000 pesos is awarded every five years to the one citizen outstanding in cultural pursuits, artist, writer, or scientist. Latest awarded prize went to Orozco, and with it a reception at the National Palace, and a handshake from the President of the Republic, underlined by the loud applause of choice guests. Soon after that, Orozco's one-man show, arranged on a national scale, filled the great exhibition hall of the *Palacio de Bellas Artes* with bitter, corrosive, explosive plastic statements that overpowered their temporary habitat of polished marble columns, gilded balconies, and crystal chandeliers.

This exhibition marks an important departure in its presentation. None of the great muralists of today had yet been shown in convincing fashion. The walls they paint cannot be moved, and the movable specimens of their work—geometric plans, studies from nature, tracings meant to transfer a design to the wall—are often informally jotted down on wrapping paper or on tracing paper; at the end of a day's mural work, many sheets, maculated with fresco paint and soaked in lime water, crumple at the foot of the scaffold, to be trampled upon and carted away, more often to the refuse pile than to a collector's home. In the case of Orozco, the artist and the officials

in charge of the exhibition wisely decided that his preliminary drawings and studies for the walls were of medullary importance. Orozco's portfolios disgorged the drawings that he had saved through decades of mural work; hundreds of sketches on all kinds of paper and in all kinds of mediums; architectural notes and measurements, studies on the optical deformations to which a drawing is subjected when drawn on the semisphere of a cupola, sets of studies of one limb or one gesture that start with academic precision and end in ordered turmoil. Photos and photo-murals helped visualize the finished walls. It was a beautiful show, even though—or because—it could not be made to conform to the usual pattern of picture shows, where the repeated rectangles of gold frames induce in the spectator an automatic soporific respect for whatever it is that they frame.

To state that Cézanne painted apples is a somewhat meager clue to his art, for his scruple built a high China wall between what he painted and what confidence a scopolamine shot could

CIVIL WAR, executed ca. 1927, pen and India ink drawing.



have induced. But a description of Orozco's subject matter is relevant to a study of his esthetic, for in his case, ideation, composition, and execution succeed one another so quickly as to be practically simultaneous. Where the Frenchman's wisdom isolates subject matter from art and light from form and color, Mexican Orozco is quite satisfied to agglutinate nature and inspiration, means and ends, in the same monochrome, shapeless mess in which living organs are revealed under the surgeon's scalpel, so unlike the red, blue, and yellow wax organs that stuff anatomical dummies.

When Orozco is at work, hieroglyphs of passion pour forth from his inner recesses onto wall or canvas, with not even a pause after birth to get accustomed to the new climate and new milieu, to be slapped and bathed and swaddled into rational shape, as are statements that are meant for public exposure. Rather than from any strangeness or keenness of idea, the strength of his work comes from a total lack of make-up.

Because of this, many critics, and more often his leftist friends whom he alternately raises to hope and sinks in despair, brand his thought as anarchistic. So it would be, and an old-fashioned bomb at that, thrown haphazardly and scattering its small shot on such an expanded radius as to prove mostly ineffectual, if Orozco were only a scoffer and a denier.

Closest literary approach to his work is that of Leon Bloy, who could impale his victim on hot words as efficiently as any devil on a cherry-red fork. If Bloy is recognized today as great, it is not because of his attacks on personages now mostly forgotten, but because his constructive facet so immeasurably transcended his aggressiveness. Bloy's—and Orozco's—positive faith and positive vision are so radiant, even though jealously kept to themselves, as to make them all the more muscularly dust and vacuum and scour their private universe of the stains and specks of all that, and of all those, that fell short of an ever-throbbing ideal.

Orozco the cartoonist could represent man in his variety, from president to pimp, from schoolgirl to prostitute. Man is still the theme of his later work, but the mature Orozco forgets the many masks, plows under the motley moral and psychological nuances. His murals are peopled with generalized man, as clustered, as naked, and intertwined, as *putti* in a Fragonard cartouche, but of a most bitter hue. So intense is Orozco's preoccupation with man that landscape is reduced to a shorthand version, even in country scenes, and his few still lifes are anthropomorphic. A late, large tempera features a kitchen cabbage that becomes a human cranium, while the curling edges of leaves mimic a crown of laurels, and the whole becomes a comment on the perishable nature of fame.

This obsession with man is not eulogistic, for the artist admits, in fact secretly relishes, the shortcoming of his subject. Yet he is not a true pessimist, for in his paintings man, however cruelly frustrated, never ceases to affirm potentialities of grandeur. Religious themes become increasingly prevalent over satirical ones. In the early Saint Francis series, in the Martyrdoms and the Golgothas that he paints today, Orozco's positive affirmation of faith is nonetheless impressive for being unconsciously uttered and consciously denied.

One should not prejudge that a belief in God would soothe the artist's frenzy. Of the type of faith that is conceived as a social appendage to gracious living, Orozco gave an unflattering comment in his "Father God," who holds a geographical globe instead of the medieval macrocosm, winks the rich into Heaven and shoos the poor off to Hell. Far from a salve, faith is for him a means of enlarging to God's size man's distresses, a point of view that coincides instinctively with the one cogent reason advanced by theology to usher in the Passion. Translating the Magnificat into Mexican terms—"He has humbled the proud and exalted the meek"—Orozco expects to witness in a next world the longest and best of all revolutions.

Orozco: APOCALYPSE, 1944, detail of the fresco in the Church of Jesus, Mexico City.

