

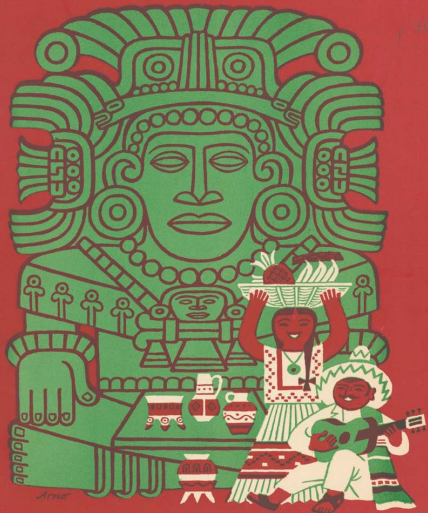
PASSPORT TO MEXICO: A SPECIAL SECTION

Saturday Review

OF LITERATURE

TWENTY CENTS

SEPTEMBER 15, 1951



Contributors on Mexico: *Tom Lea, Henry Parkes, Salvador Novo, Anita Brenner, Herbert Weinstock, Horace Sutton, Philip Raine, Jean Charlot, Luisa Alvarez and others*

Painting and Revolution

JEAN CHARLOT



Jean Charlot

MEXICAN art is as a whole characterized by a quality of mexicanidad, a term that could be translated as mexicaness. This assertion would constitute a frightful commonplace if the forms that

Mexican art has taken through the centuries were not so varied and at first contact so disparate that the search for, and detection of, their common spiritual and esthetic denominator needs a flair and knowledge above the average.

Three periods in the long history of Mexican art evoke clear, if oversimplified images: the Mexico of pre-Hispanic antiquity, its art-forms geared to the gesture of the priest wrenching the throbbing human heart from inside the cage of living ribs; colonial Mexico, when a sea of converts worshipped before a sea of images as tortured and bloody as any idols, or else as gilded and hieratical as a viceroys retinue appearing to his subjects from atop a balcony. Thirdly, there are today's murals, always scaled to bigness and often to greatness.

Besides these well-defined periods, Mexico is further enriched by the arts of two times of transition, both keyed to crucial upheavals; lacking these less known periods, the three well-known styles, antique, colonial, and modern, would be hard put to prove their inner oneness. In the sixteenth century the Conquest threw open to overseas influences the closed world of forms and colors informed with sacred meanings that the Aztec artist evolved and mastered; it was as if an Egyptian decorator of the third millennium B.C. had been placed in the presence of works

Southwest painter and muralist Jean Charlot is also an art critic who has closely followed the great school of painting which emerged in Mexico and made such an impact on the rest of the world. He has just finished an important mural at Arizona State College.

by Titian or Tintoretto and bid to copy them. That a regional flavor survived at all after this grand écart is proof of the sturdiness of Mexico's esthetic instinct. Shedding their pagan skin, the idols were renewed into Christian holy intercessors. For a short time the art of conquered Mexico adopted a Byzantine stiffness as the novelty of the subject matter piled new terrors on top of the old esoteric dogma. Soon familiarity with heaven bred a mood of loving appreciation and from then on Christian grace informs even the more roughly hewn stone.

The second period of transition is much closer to us in time, but even less known today than are the shifting forms of art at the time of the Conquest. Politically the nineteenth century was filled with mad disasters and revolutions as had been the sixteenth century; but everything now was geared in reverse. As it seceded from Spain the young Republic wished obscurely for an art of its own. This time the problem was how to break away from European art and to trace one's way back to primitiveness, though none of the patriotic artists of

that time would have cared to express it that bluntly. A formidable task confronted the generation born early in the century, nurtured to masterhood at the Regal Academy of San Carlos under the coldly shining star of Mengs's teachings. At heart they knew well that Spanish art, even official Spanish art, was great in its achievements. Yet it was their higher duty to turn their back on the Greek masterpieces cast in plaster that were a gift to the school from the Crown of Spain, so splendid as to arouse enthusiasm in no less a connoisseur than Baron de Humboldt. The young men of the 1840's gleaned what revolt they could from shreds of the work of Goya, impolite, cynical, brutally frank at times, a work mysteriously tuned to their own as yet unexpressed quality of mexicanidad that needed another century to mature. It was the time when the Indian sculptor Patiño Ixtolinque carved local stones with due regard for their natural grain and shape. Though his subject matter remained academic—women symbolizing virtues—the brown hand managed the chisel with all the discretion of a stone-age sculptor, and the cheese-cloth ceased to hide the monolith. A rich residue of Mexican esthetics awaits the patience of the modern appreciator of the work of a master muralist of the mid-nineteenth century, Juan Cordero. He covered thousands of square feet of walls and cupolas with heroic compositions. His gift for chromatic dissonances that his well-meaning friends denied or minimized is what endears him to us today.

Modern Mexican art is said to have been born of a revolution, or rather the Revolution, started in 1910 and still "in the air" today. Perhaps, however, in the esthetic sense it was no more than a return to the past, a reassessment of an honorable patrimony. The Revolution proved useful mostly as a cog, the piece of machinery needed to join together ancient walls and young muralists. To make frescoes possible it was imperative that there be men in power unafraid of public opinion. As it turned out, ca. 1920, these upper-dog politicians were in fact desirous to ram down the throat of the bourgeois the consciousness of defeat and a squirming sense of their social predicament. Bohemians in their twenties, or at most their thirties, were given public walls to paint as other men had been given palaces to sack, but the resentment at such a breach of etiquette, being of a cultural nature, simmers up to this day. The champions of genteel taste, who were also the opponents of the





Orozco's fresco "Prometheus" at Pomona College, California—"modern Mexican art is said to have been born of a revolution."

upstart regime, patiently waited for the public revulsion that would get rid of these mural monstrosities and herald the political humiliation of their enemies. These frescoes, once condemned so roundly, have by now become a national pride and even an international asset. Not even the aging men who commissioned the works when they were young, as a lusty beau geste, understand how it all came to pass, but they breathe the more easily.

What happened is that the artists commissioned to paint walls felt how these noble seasoned buildings dictated a task vaster than a display of personality: if their work was to be successful it should prove to be more, a mouthpiece for collective feelings that at the time ran their gamut from the passionate mayhem of active revolution to the stilled depths of meditation that precede and follow action wherever Indian blood is concerned. Perhaps the best proof that the painters acted not unlike mediums is the fact that regardless of their leftist mouthings they produced such masterpiecepieces of religious art as Orozco's series on the life of Saint Francis, or Revueltas's "Devotion to the Virgin

of Guadalupe," fit expressions of their people.

EACH school of art may be summed up in a single esthetic canon. For example, the Greek ideal type, be it a bronze athlete or a marble Venus, flexes his muscles or exhibits her curves as a king set within a vacuum. The Mexican Indian prefers to take his stand in nature with a kind of artless camouflage, flesh color melting into the color of earth; the Greek theatrical gesture gives way here to less exposed ones, bending and squatting. In consequence some time throughout the years 1920-25 an ideal Mexican type was evolved that has already become a classical art form, as shorn of paraphernalia as was the Greek nude man. Intent on duplicating Indian ways, the muralist found to his delight that to paint this brown man clad in white better all that was needed was a severely limited palette of lime-resistant pigments, all earth colors that are the very nuances of earth, and dust, and straw, and dark flesh. Esthetic considerations blended with technical ones led to the rebirth on a large scale of, true fresco.

Once they had asserted themselves the muralists could not hold long the allegiance of a slightly younger generation, come to artistic maturity in a milieu that took murals for granted, and thus looked for excitement to a different fare. If we list the antithesis of mural work we also define this very natural reaction. The very big gave way to the very small, the quick coverage of vast areas to a miniature technique, and decorative simplifications to a patient rendering of accumulated detail. Perhaps Julio Castellanos, now dead, remains the star of the anti-mural trend.

In the Paris of the 1920's cubism proved a natural ally of our brand of muralism, imbued as both were with an architectural spirit and at least a groping towards collective expression. When cubism gave way to surrealism these secret affinities were severed, and a few Mexicans attempted to forge another link, this time on a new basis. It remains the specialized role of masters like Mérida and Tamayo to help international critics bridge over what in their work is orthodox modernism towards the mysterious lands of Amerindian thought and culture.