

PAINTED WALLS OF MEXICO

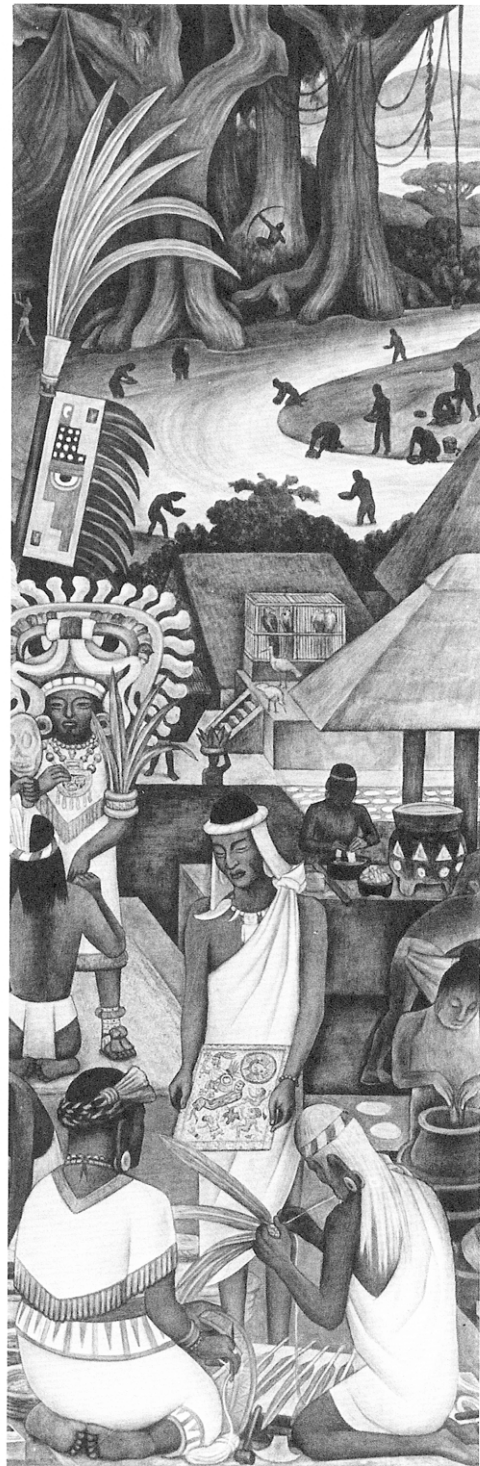
From Prehistoric Times until Today

Text by Emily Edwards

Photographs by Manuel Álvarez Bravo

Foreword by Jean Charlot

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FOREWORD

This book tells the story of Mexican murals equally well in words and with pictures. Though it is an objective report, documented and exhaustive, no reader could be misled into believing that it is yet another thesis, constructed by some conscientious and gifted post graduate intent on a Ph.D.

Indeed not! Both authors—writer and photographer—were vitally involved in the esthetic drama whose roots reached back to the nineteen-twenties, when the mural renaissance was acquiring bulk and style. Only a handful of painters shared with a handful of friends the load of these lean years. The hand that held the brush moved over the damp fresco mortar to the rhythm of an obbligato of jeers and catcalls. Perched high on the mural scaffold, his back turned to this blatantly critical world, the painter himself hardly knew where, if ever, he would gain support and understanding.

Those who shared this moment cannot forget its mood. As I read the text and ponder the plates, I share again with both authors the throbbing drama. Memories pull at the leash of scholarly apparatus that the very form of the book demands. Achieving their goal of objectivity, the authors add to it a bonus. No reader could remain immune to the veiled fever that they felt, and that he feels in turn, and that communicates better than any statistics the quality of the exciting subject matter.

Emily Edwards, with enthusiasm, marshals such voluminous and complex data that one less familiar with the story would falter under the load. Manuel Álvarez Bravo is impelled by the same fervor. If one should pick the most impersonal of visual media, documentary photography would be the choice. Yet no artist who did not experience the excitement of the mural revolution, even if master of an equally exacting technique, could match the beauty of these pictures. That is perhaps because Álvarez Bravo, unconsciously, has blended into one the portrait of Mexico and his self-portrait. Thus, thanks to the common outlook of the authors, an all-pervasive *mexicanidad* informs both the text and the plates of this book, raising it to a more coherent level than would a recital of facts only.

Mexican art is one in three. As we follow its transformations through two milleniums, its organic wholeness appears to suffer violence, sliced as it is into three broad

segments, Pre-Hispanic, Colonial, and Modern. The three appear at odds, even at war with each other. How could the theogonical drama that spills human blood down the steep steps of pagan pyramids ever dovetail into the Murillo-esque graces of the Seven Archangels holding lilies? In turn, how could these eighteenth-century *santos* be kin to the loud frescoes painted in the twenties of our century, that flaunt red banners and brandish clenched fists?

Yet the three styles are but masks that the one individual, Mexico, puts on at wish, or discards. Deeply embedded in soil and race, underlying themes bridge unscathed from one era into the next. Typical is the persistence of the theme of death. Skulls are piled up on Aztec temple racks. The Catholic hermit hugs a skull to his breast as a reminder of bodily corruption. About 1900 Guadalupe Posada, no muralist himself but an unpolluted mirror for *mexicanidad*, portrayed skulls decked in the accoutrements of the living: clerical skulls topped with a biretta, feminine skulls under beflowered hats, military skulls with waxed mustache and plumed shako. In the forties, when Pablo O'Higgins and Leopoldo Méndez decorated a newly built maternity hospital, their first care was to paint on its walls a female skeleton some thirty feet tall!

Mural painting presupposes in its maker a certain amount of selflessness. The painted wall is only a fragment of an architectural complex. Communication remains its essence, and the message must be stated in terms clear to the man in the street, the devout in his church, or the unionized worker in the meeting hall. By definition a mural is not intended to cater to the specialized art lover. Walls are not a proper surface for a naked display of self, a dialogue between the id and the ego. Some of the finest moments in the history of art remain antimural in essence. Such are, in our century, the esoteric probings of analytical cubism and, later on, the outpourings of abstract expressionism. The mural painter, as he plies his craft, soon learns to use a healthy dose of humility.

It so happened that in any century when walls beckoned to Mexican artists they themselves were preconditioned to the task. This mural vocation was never a matter of ignorance but of choice. Mexican art is not ignorant of foreign arts, but rather cautious in regard

to their lure. At times Mexicans work with the grain. In the seventeenth century imported Zurbarans of the morose kind could hardly be distinguished from the local product. Eighteenth-century artists gratefully acknowledged the lessons of Spain. The Royal Academy of the Fine Arts of San Carlos of New Spain, founded in Mexico City, modeled itself and its teachings on the Royal Academy of San Fernando of Madrid. In our century Paris replaced Madrid for the Mexican artist. A Montparnasse exile for more than a decade, Rivera, together with Gino Severini, took part in the elusive hunt for a fourth dimension that crossed over the borderline of the metaphysical into higher mathematics. At the same time, Siqueiros, stranded in Italy, tried his hand at *pittura metafisica* along the lines stated by Carlo Carra. Europe could have spoiled for those artists a native taste for mural painting. Paris prided itself on its sophistication. Master painters conquered peak after peak in their quest for the esoteric. The nonartist, the bourgeois, was soon left behind, quite out of breath.

Paris shunned all forms of didacticism and shied away from even the mildest of storytelling. Nineteenth-century Romanticism seemed gross, with its accent on experiences shared by all men—passion and pain and death. The position of the elite was well stated by Jean Cocteau in a self-satisfied dictum: the relation between the molding of a chair and the corner of a table holds for us a drama equal to that of the cornered lion devouring the burnoused Arab hunter.

At that very time, Mexican artists, now including Rivera and Siqueiros, who had returned to the *patria*, felt themselves compelled to work against the grain of the Parisian trend. Murals dictated their attitude, and their style in turn was adapted to the many who looked at the murals, not the least among them the masons who, day after day, in close communion with the painters, troweled the walls for the frescoes.

From the local point of view it would be true to say that the rest of the world was out of step with Mexico. What was being spread on public walls came close to what the seventeenth century had called *peinture d'histoire*. Mexicans painted history in the making, its actors, heroes and villains alike, still alive or freshly dead. Their aims were didactic, and communication with the non-artist was a must. To this end they stressed anew the old-fashioned themes that Paris had discarded—passion and pain and death. It was of course a sincere reflection of the highly dynamic moment and milieu. Naturally, outside Mexico the work was branded as insufferably unfashionable. A visitor who was also a well-known art critic, with the forlorn hope of deflecting us toward

saner ways, suggested that all Mexican muralists should subscribe to Parisian vanguard magazines!

That was in the twenties. Fashions change. Social conditions change. In the thirties, Mother Spain became involved in a civil war that, for turmoil and bloodletting, came close to matching the ways of its errant child, Mexico. Spanish Picasso reacted as the Mexicans had. He painted *Guernica*, a mural. In it, anguished mothers hug to their breasts murdered infants. The bull has gored the horse. Its gashed carcass collapses over the dead hero, a broken sword still clenched in his fist. American and European art lovers, who knew that Picasso could do no wrong, were led to reassess the esthetic potential of historical painting. Seen in the new light, the Mexican murals seemed less obtuse, and the ways of their makers less provincial. Already, fifteen years before *Guernica*, the Mexicans had forcefully stated the artist's right to deal in intense human drama, and his duty to master didactic requirements. As usual, the muralists were too busy at work to notice the change of wind in the international critical atmosphere, and too involved in fresh problems to tip their hat to Picasso.

The uniqueness of Mexican art comes from its refusal to merge unquestioningly in the international picture of the moment, of any moment. As we have seen, it goes at times with the grain, at other times against the grain. It does so for reasons that always are its own. This stubborn attitude in the face of outside pressures is what saves Mexican art as an entity, a self that takes many forms and yet always remains itself. If one would pluck a parallel from the many to be found in the history of art, I would choose the case of Peter Breughel. Still in his twenties, he left his Lowlands and toured Italy. The Renaissance was at its height, with already a touch of overripeness. From all Europe artists flocked to Rome, and to Florence, and to Parma. Breughel was but one among that flock of young artists. Perhaps we remember him today as the one true master among them, because, far from deflecting his style toward Italian grandeur as did the many, he realized instead, face to face with the *Last Judgment*, that his task was inverse. It was to remain true to race and to country. Breughel returned to his Northern *patria* more consciously Flemish than when he had left it. Perhaps Rivera, in history, would never have been as Mexican as he is, had he not experienced years of exile in that Rome of his day, Paris, and had he not reacted in the end as Breughel did before him.

JEAN CHARLOT