

The University City murals

*Lourdes Cruz González Franco**



Louise Noelle / IIE / UNAM.

David Alfaro Siqueiros, New symbol of the university (Rectorate Building, 1952-56).

Mexico's University City is one of the most important works of contemporary Mexican architecture because of its contribution to both urban planning and architecture. The murals on some of its buildings, painted between 1952 and 1956, are equally noteworthy.

They are outstanding examples of the stylistic trend, known as artistic integration, that emerged in Mexico in the 40s. This was an attempt to fuse painting and sculpture with architecture in a unified whole. Besides being significant in their own right, each of the murals contributed to the University City's uniquely Mexican character.

The Central Library

There are two parts to the library: a horizontal section housing the reading rooms and a ten-story vertical section containing the collection. The second section is without windows or doors in order to preserve the books inside and its four outer walls are faced with what was the largest mural of its time: four thousand square meters of natural colored stone arranged by Juan O'Gorman to form a narrative and symbolic summary of Mexican history.

The technique was derived from that of a previous mural jointly executed by O'Gorman and Diego Rivera at the latter's studio, known as Anahuacalli, in 1941.

The method consisted of pouring small concrete slabs, five centimeters thick and one meter square, into plaster molds. These were placed over stone mosaics, previously arranged to fit the design and color of the pattern first copied to scale on sheets of paper. Once the concrete set, the portable squares could easily be positioned on the library walls.

The stones were personally chosen by O'Gorman in various parts of Mexico and then hammered to

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pieces by a group of masons. The advantage of using natural stone in outer walls is that, unlike paint, it withstands sunlight, rain and bad weather.

The library's north wall depicts the pre-Hispanic era, with gods of the indigenous cosmogony, such as Tezcatlipoca, Chalchiuhtlicue, Quetzalcoátl, Tláloc and the symbol of the founding of Tenochtitlan.

On the south wall, the nation's Colonial past is symbolized by Charles V's coat of arms, a church built on a *teocalli* and Ptolemy's and Copernicus' view of the cosmos, among other images.

The east wall alludes to the modern world, with the struggles of Zapata and Villa. It also includes symbols of the atom, technology, architecture and modern industry.

On the west wall, modern Mexico is represented by the National University of Mexico's coat of arms. Below this is a spring symbolizing culture and knowledge, with the fruits of study and work on either side.

The Rectorate Building

The Rectorate houses the university's governing body, which explains its rank and importance with respect to the other buildings in the complex. Its proportions, together with the use of materials such as onyx and glazed earthenware in its façade and the quality of David Alfaro Siqueiros' murals make this one of the most successfully executed buildings.



Ana Luisa Brañas / IIE / UNAM.

Juan O'Gorman (Central Library, north wall, 1952).



IIE / UNAM.

David Alfaro Siqueiros, *The people to the university, the university to the people* (Rectorate Building, 1952-56).

Siqueiros' wonderfully expressive vinylite mural, entitled the *New symbol of the university*, decorates the fifth and sixth floor façade of the Rectorate, corresponding to the University Council Hall. His glass mosaic *The people to the university, the university to the people*, appears on the lower half of the building's south wall, while his vinylite mural on the north wall *Allegory of culture* remains unfinished.

A striking feature of these murals is that the figures appear three-dimensional, since they stand out up to a meter in relief from the building's façade, allowing them to be seen from numerous angles, even from moving cars.

The Faculty of Science

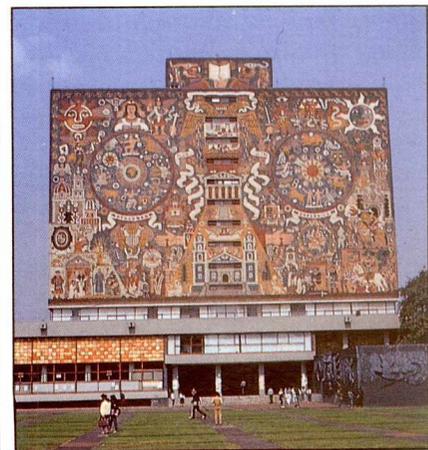
This building no longer houses the faculty, now transferred to newer, larger premises. The painter José Chávez Morado executed three murals here, two on the outer walls and another above the entrance to the auditorium.

The largest of these, *The evolution of energy*, is on the north façade of the auditorium. Using glass mosaic, Chávez Morado

depicted man's struggle to find a life source, from the discovery of fire to nuclear energy.

On the south façades Chávez Morado used the same type of mosaic for *The return of Quetzalcoátl*, showing the pre-Hispanic god's return to Mesoamerica, in the company of some of the best-known gods of universal culture.

Finally, Chávez painted the vinylite mural at the entrance to the auditorium, *The builders*, representing the various social strata that helped to build University City.



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Juan O'Gorman (Central Library, south wall, 1952).



Louise Noelle / IIE / UNAM.

José Chávez Morado, *The evolution of energy* (Faculty of Science).

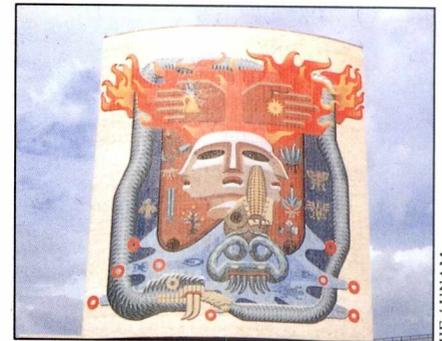
The Faculty of Dentistry

Francisco Eppens' 1953 mural for this faculty appears on the south wall of the amphitheater. Called *Man's*

a tree trunk emerging from the ground as a result of his intelligence —symbolized by a flame issuing from his head and hand—, culture —being represented by a plumed serpent— and morals by a missionary.

The Faculty of Medicine

Francisco Eppens created a 360 m² glass mural, *Life, death and the four elements* on the outside walls of the faculty's auditorium. The fact that it is located inside University City is important, since it overlooks a large square crossed by thousands of students every day.



IIE / UNAM.

Francisco Eppens, *Life, death and the four elements* (Faculty of Medicine, 1953).

the right and in the center, the product of their union, the mestizo child representing modern Mexico.



IIE / UNAM.

Francisco Eppens, *Man's self-improvement* (Faculty of Dentistry, 1953).

self-improvement, it is made of glass mosaic covering an area of 120 m².

The painter wished to express the supremacy of modern man depicted as

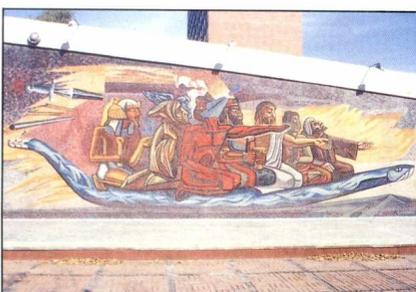
The mural is an allegory of life based on indigenous motifs. Life and death are represented by the serpent that surrounds the whole work. The four elements are interpreted as follows: water, by the god Tláloc, and the glyph for water; air, by birds and insects; earth, shown by the breasts, necklace, hands and skull of Coatlicue who is devouring an ear of corn; and fire, depicted by the flames of Mayan suns.

This mural also symbolizes the Mexican mestizo by a three faced head with the profile of an indigenous mother on the left, a Spanish father on

The University Olympic Stadium

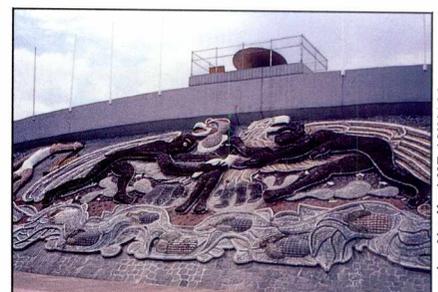
In 1954, Diego Rivera began a mural on the outside of the stadium, which he never finished. The original idea was to use stone mosaic to make a painting in relief of the development of sport in Mexico from pre-Hispanic times to the present. Unfortunately, Rivera was able to complete only the central part showing the University's coat of arms borne by the eagle and condor.

These murals are representative of a period in Mexican art, both for their location and the fact that they are successfully integrated into their surroundings. It should be noted that over the years painters have continued to enrich the university with murals on a number of walls. To cite just one example, in 1980, Federico Silva painted *The history of mathematical space* on the outside of the Faculty of Engineering 



Berta Tello / IIE / UNAM.

José Chávez Morado, *The return of Quetzalcóatl* (Faculty of Science).



Louise Noelle / IIE / UNAM.

Diego Rivera (University Olympic Stadium, 1954).