

Orozco in San Ildefonso: the eruption of modernity on the walls of the past

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In the old Colegio de San Ildefonso building, Mexican art displays the contemporaneity of its history. By 1922 the conditions had been established for promoting new artistic principles. The triumphant Mexican Revolution needed to express its meaning and values through a new artistic language.

A visionary named José Vasconcelos, then Secretary of Public Education, raised the banner of a new culture in which the collective would become an aesthetic witness to its own history. It was thus that a vast creative force exploded on the walls of the old Jesuit school of San Ildefonso, giving birth to Mexico's most memorable contribution to contemporary world art: muralism.

While there are several reasons why San Ildefonso is a site of extraordinary cultural interest, the works which José Clemente Orozco painted on its walls between 1922 and 1926, at Vasconcelos' invitation, are themselves a visual experience which merits more than one visit.

Among the artists who left their mark on the building, it was Orozco who contributed the largest number of works, 26 in total. Almost all are of exceptional artistic power, satisfying the demands of Vasconcelos' project

to renovate Mexican culture. Always observing the architectural proportions of the building and adapting his compositions to them, Orozco painted the walls of the first, second and third floors, as well as the stairwells of the so-called Big School.

There seems to be a wide range both of themes and of formal means for developing them. Nevertheless, the common thread which ties them together is a meditation uniting history, universal myths, social criticism and daily life into a single whole, whose artistic logic continues to elicit commentary.

In the school's first-floor patio, the artist created unforgettable scenes whose dominant theme is the revolutionary struggle. From left to right one sees the following frescoes: *The Banquet of the Rich*, *The Revolutionary Trinity*, *The Strike*, *The Destruction of the Old Order* and *Motherhood*.

The most famous is undoubtedly *The Trench*, a magnificent fresco in which three men in peasant dress tense their marvelous bodies, without there seeming to be any specific intention to their movements. Framed by a geometric structure, they are



Orozco contributed the largest number of works on San Ildefonso's walls.

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Sergio Dorantes.

The Farewell.

only three bodies whose tension reveals the drama of war. Even the figure shown on its knees, defeated, does not lack energy: it possesses a kind of vital failure.

The works of Orozco in San Ildefonso never fail to produce a certain uneasiness in the spectator, perhaps because they are not



Sergio Dorantes.

The Blessing.

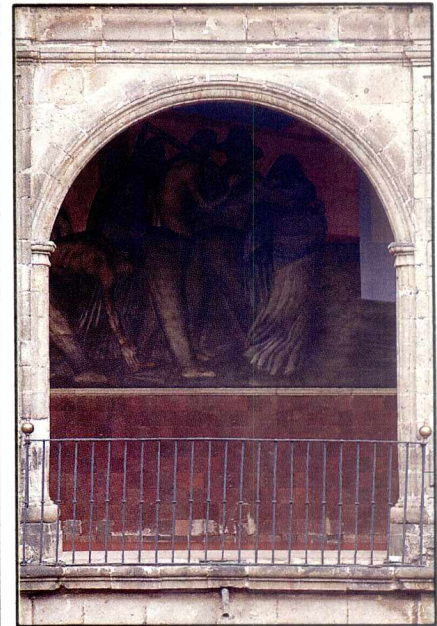
unconditional frescoes for glorification of the revolution's armed struggle. A work like *The Revolutionary Trinity* is far from being an apology of the revolution. Instead, it seems to question the events' meaning as it depicts a soldier with mutilated hands, a weeping peasant on his knees and a worker blinded by the flag which covers his face.

The artist does not consider it necessary to bestow victory, in his painting, to that which had already been triumphant in society itself. Neither does he seek to instruct a supposedly ignorant public about its heroes and their great deeds. His painting is not an ideological reproduction of the existing social triumph. It can be said that, in a certain way, it is the opposite: the hidden side of victory, its tragic dimension, the price paid to obtain it—and that is precisely where Orozco's expressive power resides.

Among the works on the first floor, the fresco called *Motherhood* is an exception to the theme. It is the only mural which has been conserved out of a series of exercises which Orozco originally painted in the school and later erased. Critics have repeatedly pointed out the influence of the Italian Renaissance on the painting, in which the angelic figures of the upper part evoke the weightlessness of Botticelli's figures.

On the walls flanking the entrance to the staircase one observes two frescoes which, although removed from the great themes of the school, are not devoid of virtuosity: *Thirsty Men* and *The Engineers*. Still, Orozco's power returns in the murals in the staircase area devoted to the Conquest: *Cortés and Malinche*, *The Franciscans*, *The Builder-Conquistador* and *Indigenous Races*.

The works on the second floor differ from those on the first, both in style and theme. They tend to be a parody of various social groups' customs. The artist uses the



Sergio Dorantes.

Workers.

exaggerated forms typical of caricature; while in his early works Orozco practiced this genre it would not be entirely accurate to define the works on the second floor as "mural caricatures."

It would be more precise to say that the artist uses the expressive resources of disfiguration in order to put them at the service of painting,



Sergio Dorantes.

Gravedigger.



The Trench (triptych).

although they do not thereby lose their nature as parody. From left to right, the order of the murals is: *Law and Justice*, *Jehovah Between the Rich and the Poor*, *Liberty*, *The Watchtowers*, *Trash* and *The Rich*.

As is his custom, Orozco does not take sides with any of the social sectors depicted in his work. His mordant wit is aimed equally at the rich and the poor. Beyond parody, the meaning of the frescoes in this section points to a criticism of the ideas, beliefs and idols of modernity. Phrygian caps, scales, swastikas, moneyboxes, chains, skeletons, etc., are used to symbolize the oppression that ideas exercise on the mind of man.

For the painter no concepts are elevated to the status of truth; instead, men are enslaved by these dogmas. Rich and poor appear as grotesque puppets of beliefs, and both are subject to pettiness and vice. The mural entitled *Trash* portrays a mound of abandoned symbolic objects: the dunghheap where all ideologies are laid to rest.

The frescoes of the third floor are the following (again from left to right): *Women*, *The Gravedigger*, *The*

Blessing, *Workers*, *The Farewell*, *The Family* and *Revolutionaries*. If the drama inherent in the tragedy of victory predominates in the first-floor murals, while on the second floor the dark criticism of caricature reigns, the theme of the third floor is the pathos of rural life in times of war. The armed struggle does not appear in an obvious manner. The artist shows daily country life, behind the scenes of war.

All the works in this series radiate a luminous serenity, obtained through chromatic contrasts between blues and greys. The figures, less delineated than those of the first floor, blend into the architecture and rural countryside in which they are set, thus creating an ambience of pastoral solitude—a legacy left by those who give their life to the Revolution.

Perhaps Orozco's great theme in San Ildefonso is none other than the sacrifice of a people who get worn out, who tire in the struggle, who abandon their lands and loved ones. A sacrifice which goes beyond the ideology for which they gave themselves to the struggle, and thereby takes on a sacred character.

In symbolic form, the cruciform composition of *The Trench* poses a possible reading on this theme: the three bodies give the impression of being one, in three different times, like photographs which break down the intervals of an action within a single frame.

Thus we see a standing man, another at the moment of falling and a third on the ground in an attitude of defeat. A diagonally-positioned rifle protrudes between the first two figures, setting the axis of the mural's composition, while at the same time it forms the semi-vertical shaft of a cross. The transverse pole of this cross is defined by the imaginary line which runs from the arm of the figure in the middle to the top of the geometric shape of the trench. Thus, the cross and war serve as one and the same artistic metaphor, centered on the sacrifice of a people, in which history and myth constitute two sides of a single coin.

In San Ildefonso, modernity crashes into the walls of the past. And it reconciles itself with the past. Orozco is the main inventor of this synthesis ✘