

The Old College of San Ildefonso

Elsie Montiel*

THE VENUE

Associated with education and culture since its foundation, the history of this museum dates back to colonial times. Founded by the Jesuits in 1588, it was one of the most important educational institutions of New Spain's capital. As it is today, it dates from the eighteenth century and is one of the most outstanding examples of civic architecture of its time. After the Jesuits were expelled in 1767, the building fulfilled different functions, most related to education, although it was also used as a barracks in nineteenth-century Mexico after independence. In 1867, a Liberal educational reform created the National Preparatory School, and San Ildefonso was chosen as its site. In 1910, the National Preparatory School became part of the National University, founded that year. Until 1978, it was the spawning ground for several generations of intellectuals and outstanding public figures. Closed to the public until 1992, it was restored to hold the huge exhibition "Mexico: Splendors of 30 Centuries." Since then, the Old College of San Ildefonso has been a center for exhibiting art from all periods; its size makes it possible to use all the rooms and patios for all kinds of artistic creations, with exhibits whose dimensions and importance leave a lasting mark on the memory of those who have the privilege of viewing them.



Patricia Pérez



José Clemente Orozco "Painting and Truth"



I feel that my heart has grown little by little, becoming larger than myself, larger than anything, more and more sensitive, more and more ardent.¹

They say every human being is unique and unrepeatable, making it impossible to know what is in the depths of each one. That is why we almost always judge the acts and motives of our fellow men and women—not to say our equals—on appearances. It is also known that there is a formula for going beyond appearances, for discovering the essential in every being, and that is that we must use our hearts instead of our eyes.

* Editor of *Voices of Mexico*.

In my opinion, that is the way we should approach José Clemente Orozco. Looking at his creations and then withdrawing to listen to what our heart tells us, how it fights its own opinions, how it reveals that other heart filled with commitment, personality, audacity, awareness of his time and of his own contradictions, shown in strokes of impeccable technique and a creativity so vast that it transcends mere individual achievement and becomes universal. San Ildefonso brought together the largest selection of Orozco ever accomplished: 14 rooms, 1 902 m², and 34 overall themes; this makes intensely scrutinizing his being and actions a titanic endeavor.²



Patricia Pérez

Self-portrait, 66 x 56 cm, 1946 (oil on canvas). Carrillo Gil Museum Collection.

Confronted with his self-portrait, we asked ourselves what the mirror he reflected himself in was like.



Elsie Montiel

General with Long Nails, c. 1915 (ink on paper). Isaac Gutman Collection.

“Painting and Truth” began by confronting us with a self-portrait whose unspeakably grim countenance is a surprise. We ask ourselves what the mirror he was looking at himself in was like; and then we are immediately submerged in how he was reflected and how he reflected his world, through 358 works in all facets of his artistic oeuvre: painting, sketching, gouache, engraving, and studies for his murals, what he is best known for today. The result of this process is necessarily individual, as is the opinion of every art critic who delves into the motifs of the works of this Mexican painter who traveled the road of critical painting, committed to the society of his time, without losing what made him both unique and universal.

This sketch will only attempt to report on some of the topics, like caricature (1906-1925). His first caricatures were published in 1906; however, he became polemical in 1911, in the first months of Madero’s democracy, when he echoed

other illustrators and journalists in criticizing the Madero government and its cause. Parallel to this appeared his schoolgirls and prostitutes, his figures from the dregs of society and the world of entertainment, his figures of immodest sensuality and open anticlericalism. This genre would always be present in his painting, appearing in canvases and on walls, unself-consciously and gracefully, somehow easing his seemingly tragic view of life.

Women of easy virtue are depicted in his work to contradict the image of the grim, almost authoritarian Orozco. When he was about to turn 33 and was already recognized by his contemporaries, he produced a series of watercolors “The House of Weeping,” part of his first solo exhibition, “Studies of Women.” In them, he delicately and humorously recreates life in the brothels.



Courtesy of the Old College of San Ildefonso

The Seeker, 32 x 24 cm, 1912 (oil on canvas). Private collection.



Elsie Montiel

The Masses, 33.7 x 42.9 cm, 1935 (lithograph). Private collection.



The Last Judgement, 1923-1924 (fresco). Mural at the Old College of San Ildefonso.

Elsie Montiel



Stalking, 1923-1924 (fresco). Mural at the Old College of San Ildefonso.

Elsie Montiel

San Ildefonso boasts some of the most satirical, ironic, and sublime murals Orozco ever painted.

Some of the museum's walls were part of that exhibition. San Ildefonso boasts some of the most satirical, ironic, and sublime murals Orozco ever painted (1923-1924) on the three stories of its central patio walls.

The exhibition of his paintings, spanning 1925 to 1927, is important because his art was compared to Goya's, alluding particularly to his graphic collection, "The Disasters of War." He never liked being called "the Mexican Goya," as he was dubbed in 1924: I would say only the insecure like being compared to the "greats." Poor people's wakes, rebels marching, desolate landscapes, or troops fighting; the mixture of clashing colors, grays and whites next to blues, yellows, and greens

spark a particular unease, and, implacable, he gives no quarter either to "The Masses."

His works "Mexico in the Revolution" (1926-1928) are a summary of that anti-dramatic, but simultaneously profound and unswerving, way that he used to show the tribulations of the war and its devastation.

Orozco alternated between muralism and easel painting; he did engraving, traveled and lived abroad, familiarized himself with contemporary painting, stayed firm in his own. Thus, over the years, he sketched women soldiers, revolutionary strongmen, desolate houses, architectural landscapes, buildings, bridges, *teules* or gods (pieces that recreate scenes of the conquest of Mexico, the heat of the battle between Europeans and indigenous). He covered Guadalajara's Cabañas



The Trench, 1926 (fresco). Old College of San Ildefonso Collection.

Courtesy of the Old College of San Ildefonso



Cruelty, 40.7 x 30.5 cm, 1926-1928 (water and ink on paper). Enrique Guerrero Gallery private collection.

Courtesy of the Old College of San Ildefonso



Courtesy of the Old College of San Ildefonso

Carmen T. de Carrillo Gil, 85 x 60 cm, 1944 (oil on canvas). Private collection.



Courtesy of the Old College of San Ildefonso

Ballet of Masks, 43 x 38 cm, 1945 (oil on canvas). Private collection.

Almshouse/Orphanage with frescoes that prompted someone to exclaim, “Kneel down, bastards!” —in reverence, naturally. Throughout the exhibition, it is clear that Orozco would never stop expressing himself, never stop creating. Scenes of the Gospel and compositions dealing with death, portraits, self-portraits, are followed by scenery and costume design for the Mexico City Ballet: his creative urge would die only with him.

At the end of our visit, we discover that Orozco loved life deeply, in all its manifestations, creations, and subtleties, and that’s why he charged, brush in hand, anyone who despised

it, wasted it, or dashed it to the ground; even in the deepest shadows, he placed a hint of light; he loved Man, which is why he praised everything perfect in his human activity, education, development, critical consciousness. He loved his craft, and that love was the source of the perfection in every sketch, stroke, drawing. But, above all, he loved himself; that is why he remained firm in his convictions and allowed them to transcend into his creations; at the end of the day, I believe his grim countenance was nothing more than too much ebullient energy. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Letter to Margarita, this future wife, quoted by Ricardo Castillo in “Un retrato, siete apuntes y un boceto para un estudio de ‘Pintura y verdad: La palabra enmascarada,’” from the catalogue *J.C. Orozco. Pintura y verdad* (Mexico City: Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso, 2010), p. 457.

² Part of the information about the topics in the exhibition is taken from the press bulletin for the inauguration of the exhibit “José Clemente Orozco. Painting and Truth,” September 29, 2010.



Fabien Dany/www.fabiendany.com

Man of Fire, 1937-1939, Cabañas Orphanage vaulted dome (fresco).



Fernando de Szyszlo

“In Praise of the Shadows”

The work of Peruvian painter Fernando de Szyszlo, considered one of the great living Latin American masters, was on display in San Ildefonso in the exhibition “In Praise of the Shadows” until May 8. The artist himself chose 27 paintings to try to sum up 40 years of his artistic production. Like the cherry on the cake, we are given a world premier: *Paracas: The Night*, an acrylic on canvas painted in 2011.

The introductory explanation at the start of the exhibit describes the work and the artist as follows:

These masterfully executed paintings reveal Szyszlo’s poetic temperament... the passion and the rigor with which he transcribes the pictorial event. Before his canvases, each brushstroke reveals atmospheric densities that involve the solemnity of the ritual, of creation without anecdotes. They are sparkling paths,



Puriq Runa (VIII), 100.6 x 81.4 cm, 1976 (acrylic on canvas). Pérez Simón Collection, Mexico.



Paracas: The Night, 150 x 120 cm, 2011 (acrylic on canvas). Private collection, Lima.

Photos courtesy of the Old College of San Ildefonso

places, flashes and whispers, mirages and evanescent presences betraying themselves through light and textures, the emotion sparked by the expressiveness of shadows. They sing melodies that blend with cosmic choirs...

His canvases are crossed by serpentine flows of puzzles, enigmatic waves ordered by lyricism and such an eloquent intelligence that it is difficult not to share the fluidity of that interior that animates, swells, and illuminates Fernando de Szyszlo’s painting. In it are intertwined the un-graspable and the unheard of...blinks of the landscape...furtively magnetize the canvases, cross through doorways, go up stairways without destination, and come upon walls perforated with incisions predating the alphabet....

His voice is raised from the waterfalls of being to inhabit the shadows....His colors intone the victory of life over death and oblivion....



From the "Lurin Sea" series, triptych, 200 x 600 cm, 1989 (acrylic on canvas). Private Collection, Lima.

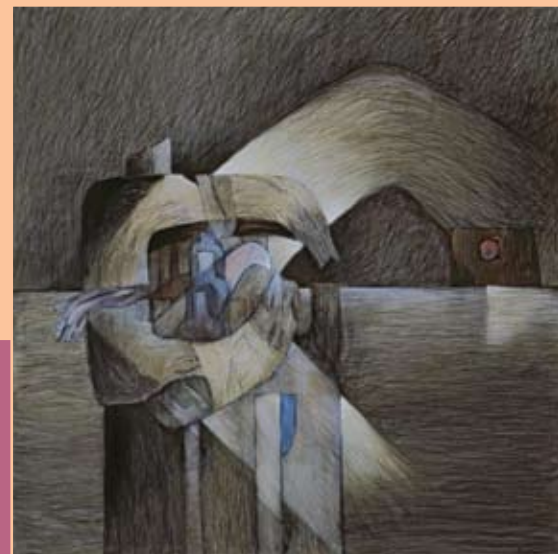
Once again, we have
an opinion about the other,
the quest for finding keys that reveal
the mystery of the motives
for human creation.

This is how we want to recognize the tremors of these canvases that reveal their creator to us. They are like life, a perpetual metamorphosis faithful to itself in the least change...The shadow that undoubtedly inhabits this voice, so subtle and complex that it emanates from Fernando de Szyszlo's canvases, is that stretch where the painter's authenticity always rules between equilibrium and harmony.

Once again, here we have the opinion about the other, the quest for finding keys that reveal the mystery of the motives for human creation. How can 40 years of painting be summed up in 27 paintings? That would be the first question. Once again, the voice of the critic and the viewer can be no more than individual; each person will make this experience something simple, transcendent, complicated, or obtuse, according to the mood and internal gaze with which he/she moves through the rooms. In the end, the painter always reserves for himself the ultimate key to his feelings. That, we should already know, is inscrutable. **VM**



Room for the Night, 190 x 140 cm, 1981 (acrylic on canvas). Private collection, Lima.



Road to Mendieta, 150 x 150 cm, 1977 (mixed technique on canvas). Private collection, Lima.

**ANTIGUO COLEGIO DE
SAN ILDEFONSO**

Justo Sierra 16, Centro Histórico,
Mexico City, C.P. 06020
Phone: (54 55) 5702-2991

Open to the public:
Tuesday from 10:00 a.m. to 19:30 p.m.
Wednesday to Sunday from
10:00 a.m. to 17:30 p.m.

Ongoing events and exhibits:
<http://www.sanildefonso.org.mx>