

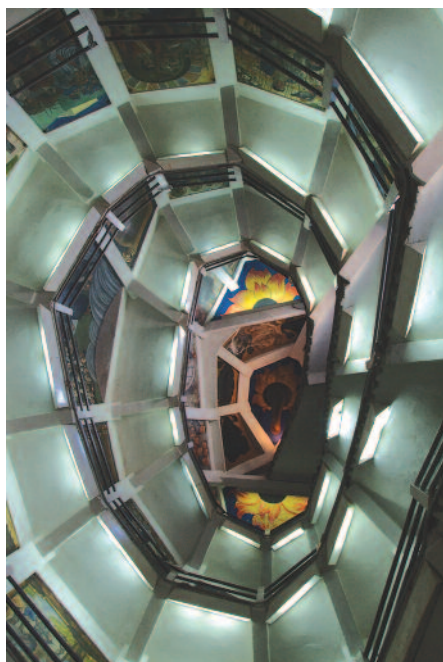
The *Life of Morelos* A Paradigmatic Mural

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The island of Janitzio.



Interior of the monument to Morelos.

Daniel Munguía

When sculptor Guillermo Ruiz finished the huge statue of Don José María Morelos y Pavón on the island of Janitzio in the middle of Pátzcuaro Lake, he invited Ramón Alva de la Canal, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Luis Sahagún and Fermín Revueltas to decorate its five-floor interior. Nevertheless, when Mexico's president at the time, Lázaro Cárdenas, saw Alva de la Canal's proposal he was so favorably impressed that he commissioned him for the entire work. The painter's first visit to Pátzcuaro was to leave an indelible mark; he would forever remember the landscape, the

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deeply rooted traditions, the colors and the customs of a town that refused to lose its identity and clung lovingly to its thousand-year-old culture.

Alva de la Canal moved into a house on the edge of the lake near the city of Pátzcuaro with his wife and children in 1935. Every day he would take a boat to the island of Janitzio. But, the daily trip became so uncomfortable that he decided to move his family to the island itself. Life there was very difficult at that time: there was no electricity, running water or other services. Painting the walls was exhausting because of the sheer size of the area to be covered with no assistants, because he had to paint under



Patzcuaro fishermen in their picturesque boats.

candle light, and because of the techniques used. The project was fascinating, however. Alva de la Canal delighted in discovering the details of the life of Morelos, “the Servant of the Nation,” as he covered 250 square meters of the interior of the statue. He painted 56 panels on five different levels, using mixed techniques with great mastery: frescoes, encaustics and tempera.

The forms, colors, lines, subtleties and transitions of light of *The Life of Morelos* reflect Alva de la Canal’s intense artistic personality and his ability to combine the individual’s life story with the most transcendental moments of our nation’s history. Don Ramón began his day at sunrise and

almost always stayed on his scaffolding until he could hear the 8 p.m. train go by, when the sun had long since gone down. During his stay in Janitzio, in addition to family members and curious tourists, he had many distinguished visitors who came to watch him paint, among them Diego Rivera, Generals Lázaro Cárdenas and Francisco Múgica and Leon Trotsky.

An excellent host, Alva de la Canal invariably surprised his guests with a snifter served from a Courvoisier bottle. But instead of cognac, the bottle held a local spirit, *charanda*, mixed with raisins. Alva said that the mixture tasted just like cognac and swore none of his visitors ever guessed what they were drinking unless he told them.



The mural has 56 panels painted in different techniques.



Daniel Munguía

When the mural was finished, President Cárdenas was so pleased with it that he commissioned Alva to do other works: *Galeana*, *Melchor Ocampo*, *Don Vasco de Quiroga*, *Juárez*, *Dr. Silva* and *Meeting of General Manuel Ávila Camacho and Roosevelt*. When his term was over, Cárdenas —popularly known as “El Tata”, or grandfather— used to go to Alva’s studio to watch him paint because he greatly appreciated him as both an artist and a friend. Today, the mural is not only an homage to Morelos as a historical figure, but a testimony to the technique and artistic qualities of one of the initiators of the Mexican muralist movement whose name is sometimes forgotten when “the big three” (Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros) are mentioned.

BRIEF NOTES ON THE PAINTER’S LIFE

Ramón Alva de la Canal was born in 1892, the oldest of 10 children. His father was a wealthy Morelia merchant related to Thomas Alva Edison, and his mother, Ma-

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Elsie Montiel

ría Teresa de la Canal Fernández de Jáuregui, was a descendent of the Count De la Canal. As a very small child, he showed a proclivity for painting. When he was still in primary school, his father took him to the San Carlos Academy where years later he would meet the great masters of his time and become part of the teaching staff. Alva de la Canal worked in art education from a very young age.

From 1920 on, as a painting teacher at the San Carlos Academy, he illustrated editions of the classics published by the Ministry of Public Instruction. The ministry, headed up at that time by José Vasconcelos, carried out an intense cultural campaign that included not only publishing classic books for mass distribution, but also support for historic mural painting, which gave rise to the muralist movement. Alva de la Canal would participate enthusiastically in both programs. In 1922, in the entryway of the National High School, he painted the 56-meter-long *The Cross Coming Ashore*, the first fresco in the history of Mexican muralism. He worked on it at the same time that Fermín Revueltas



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A street in Janitzio.

was painting *The Allegory of Our Lady of Guadalupe* in encaustic in the school's hallway. Thus, both are considered the initiators of the muralism with historic and social themes that "the big three" and other muralists would later continue. In his fresco, Alva de la Canal used "the Saint John's white" that would be used later only by Orozco. Subsequently, De la Canal became part of the "stridentist" movement, that aimed to renew and modernize Mexican letters. Iconoclasts, the lively "stridentists" Maples Arce, List Arzubide, Arqueles Vela and Alva de la Canal adopted the language of the international avant gardes. Their work was accused of being influenced

by cubism and futurism, seen for example in a series of book covers and posters done by Alva de la Canal between 1925 and 1927, as well as in his oil painting *Nobody's Café*, currently on display in Mexico City's National Art Museum.

After painting *The Life of Morelos*, Alva de la Canal did a triptych in the workshops of the Ministry of the Navy and the mural at Mexico City's Cervantes Library (1957). In 1981, he became a full member of the Mexican Academy of the Arts, and one year later, he founded the movement "Spaces for Art" together with Alfredo Zalce and myself. Ramón Alva de la Canal died in 1985. **MM**