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The Mexican muralist Diego Rivera believed that art was for everyone. In a country like Mexico, where old colonial structures pervaded social class and wealth, the people looked to revolution as the answer. During the decade long Mexican Revolution of 1910, and after it, Mexican Muralism revealed itself to be an art style for the masses, a vehicle in which to discover what it truly meant to be Mexican. Mexican Muralism in the 1930's, led by Diego Rivera, was an integral shift to an exploration of a more political interpretation of Mexico's history and the implications that it had on national identity.

The origins of Mexican Muralism began with commissions from José Vasconcelos, the minister of education under Álvaro Obregón's presidency from 1920 to 1924. Vasconcelos commissioned murals from leading Mexican artists like Diego Rivera, Jose Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. His idea was that murals would educate the larger public, who at the time were largely illiterate. The use of murals as a medium was for the reason of accessibility, in the way that anyone could visually learn from the images without having to be literate. Vasconcelos employed the use of murals as a sort of "informal education", with the intentional instruction to help shape a more united national identity. He wanted to instill teachers and the general public with feelings of national mission and desegregate the Mestizo and indigenous population who often felt isolated from Mexico's nationhood (Meyer, p. 550). At first, Vasconcelos commissioned works for Diego Rivera like Rivera's *Creation* (1922 – 1923), a metaphysical Judeo-Christian mural that had largely no political front, a commonality for those commissioned by Vasconcelos (Rochfort, p. 33). Vasconcelos's commissions helped shape the early wave of Mexican Muralism, with the prioritization of humanistic themes, such as explorations of the divine beauty of Mexico, especially focusing on indigenous people. By the 1930's, Mexican Muralism would shift to murals that were far more political, focusing on ideas of populism and class struggle. Murals of miners and rural indigenous life portrayed the "immediate concerns of the revolution," something Vasconcelos encouraged heavily, as he wanted to widen the scope of Mexican social culture's inclusion of Mestizo people (Rochfort, p.33). In many ways, Vasconcelos was the early catalyst of a new unique Mexican Muralism, but controversy would soon follow him.

During Vasconcelos's time as Minister of Education, Álvaro Obregón was president of Mexico from 1920 to 1924, a period marked by a hunger for stability and order after the preceding decade of civil war. Under Obregón's presidency, one of the main concerns was that spending money on art and "informal education" was useless when there were larger concerns at hand, like infant mortality and the economy. Some figures show Obregón's expenditures on education were around 55 million pesos, while the previous president Carranza at less than 5 million (Meyer, p. 551). Although Obregón's main spending surrounded implementing the constitution, at such a young age for the new government, he thought it best to invest in the national identity of his country. Mexico was forging its future and needed to solidify its identity, the way they saw to do this was art.

In the span of a decade, Mexican Muralism in the 1920's shifted from aesthetic and humanistic themes to subjects of an inherently political interrogation of Mexico's past by the 1930's. The large focus on history was a critical shift towards Mexico's own self-awareness of the tumultuous bloodshed that preceded 1930, and what it meant for its future. The political

dynamic had changed from a decade earlier when the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* or Institutional Revolutionary Party took power on a national scale. With the shifting revolutionary climate, the already renowned Mexican Muralist Diego Rivera took center-stage as the visionary for his murals, through his values and political beliefs. By creating an idea of institutionalized revolution, the murals of Rivera reflected that on an even greater scale through a historical lens of showing the different revolutions throughout Mexican history. By giving people a visual representation of their history, muralists like Rivera allowed people to explore the “different layers of national meaning”, whether that be from the Aztecs or the 1810 Independence from Spain. Issues like modernization, industrialism, and imperialism were also addressed in the murals of the 1930’s, cementing the strong idea of a sovereign Mexican nation on a global scale.

The concept of an ideal future or utopia was also often expressed in Mexican Muralism in the 1930’s. Rivera created utopias in his mural by painting old Aztec cities. But he also included elements of war and slavery to show a more truthful and grounded view of humanity (Rochford, p. 85). In many ways, by portraying the dark sides of history, Rivera grounds the viewer into a sort of spiritual place of good and evil. He also included his left-leaning ideologies by showing utopias of the communist revolution as shown in *The Arsenal*. His portrayal of social movements in history are displayed in a sort of utopic quality, where revolution is integrated as being an inherently Mexican quality and far from its colonial Spanish roots.

The murals painted in the 1930’s by Rivera show Mexico's history in a new light that intentionally focuses on the Mexican perspective of its history. According to Ngugi Wa-Thiong'o, colonialism deeply alters the way colonized people perceive their identities in the world. Colonialism not only has material impacts, but also affects how people view themselves. Mexico is a victim of colonization and this can obviously be seen structurally, economically, and socially. Diego Rivera’s murals are instances where Mexico gets to tell its own story for the first time, separate from its past as colonial and later imperial dehumanized conditions. Because Rivera is the visionary of these murals, his political beliefs shine at the forefront of his praxis as an artist. In many instances, the murals, like *The Wall Street Banquet* (1928) demonize capitalist wealth by portraying Rockefeller, J.P Morgan, and many other billionaires in a sinister art style, capturing a cold essence starkly different from Rivera’s harmonious murals of communism and revolution. Rivera also portrays heavy grotesque interpretations of Spaniards, like Hernando Cortez’s face in *History of Mexico* (1935), an intentional way to show distaste towards a historical figure who represents the atrocities committed against indigenous peoples. Essentially, Rivera’s murals of the 1930’s show a need and longing for separation from culturally, socially, and artistically from Europe. Rivera's murals attempt to shatter colonial prisons of identity and bring Mexico into its own strides, into its own rebirth.

Rivera's “History of Mexico” (1929 to 1935) exemplifies the way this era of muralism expresses the story of the Mexican people and their colonial experience. Decorated with immense detail and an expansive array of important figures from the Aztec Empire, Spanish Conquest, and revolutions that would follow, Rivera symbolically creates a sense of chaos that organizes itself into the story of Mexico’s history chronologized by arches. The mural was commissioned in the National Palace in Mexico, a public building accessible to everyone in a large format was critical to Rivera’s ideology of transcending class. The left inner arch of the mural is especially a great example of the way Rivera portrays Mexico’s revolutionary past and experience throughout history. The arch encompasses many figures of the revolution of 1910 to 1920, with crowds of people signifying the different key players in the movements. Porforio

Díaz appears under the arch, representing his 35-year rule of Mexico where he industrialized Mexico into an economy that benefitted the ultra-wealthy. One of the defining moments of his rule was his opening of the oil industry to American companies, so one can see oil rigs in the back of the mural, standing very prominently. The colors of the oil rigs and sky in the background is a grim gray, an important use of color to express the negative associations Rivera held with imperialism and capitalist foreign control. This can be brilliantly juxtaposed with the outer left arch's portrayal of a communist future, where the sky is a piercing blue, a clear empowering and evocative color choice.

Other important figures appear under the arch including Francisco Madero on the right side, who would take the presidency after Díaz's fall. Emiliano Zapata can be seen with his signature guerilla allies, holding the Playa de Ayala, which set out a plan for land reform and distribution challenging Madero. The sign "Tierra y Libertad y Pan" can also be seen in a bright red, drawing the viewers eyes to it and stressing the ideas of local land ownership and giving the means of production back to the people. Victoriano Huerta also appears, who is known for staging a coup against Madero that would only last a year. He is clearly indicated by his military uniform. Venustiano Carranza, the president that would follow, who would instate the constitution prominently stands surrounded by people, carrying articles of the constitution. One in particular stands out is Article 27, which reserves land reform for private citizens. In essence, all of these figures appear under the only one arch and tell just one segment of Mexican history. This arch in particular expresses the revolutionary nature of Mexico, and how forces combined and fought each other to ultimately reach the national identity of Mexico of the 1930's.

The composition of the left inner arch is cleverly crafted to create a loose narrative of history. Although it is not exactly linear in the way it is drawn, onlookers can see the layers of history and the way they relate to each other. Rivera engages his audience by starting chronologically from the bottom up, as that is the way it would be read standing in front of it. From the bottom the Spanish conquests and wars with the Natives appear as almost an avalanche. As one's eyes move upwards, the spiritual terror of the Inquisition and omnipresent Catholic church appears. The faces of the clergy are drawn in a very severe way, contrasting with the surrounding more round-faced onlookers. Going upwards into the arch, on the right side one sees the dictatorship Poroforio Díaz and the oil foreign interests expressed in the back. This stream of vision is intentional by Rivera because he wants one to associate all these negative time periods together (Rochford, p. 91).

While Diego Rivera's murals on history in the 1930's focused on national identity, José Clement Orozco, another renowned Mexican artist, took a more critical approach to his view on national identity. Orozco differs deeply from Rivera in the way that his murals use greed, corruption, power to express his ideas of Mexican history, while being vehemently against the use of utopia which Rivera utilized often (Rochford, p. 99). Orozco's murals commissioned in Dartmouth College are an excellent representation of the uniqueness of his work and the stark difference in the way he uses muralism from Rivera. At Dartmouth, the murals used historical time periods, like pre-Columbian civilization, or after Spanish arrival as moments to express specific ideas about human character, its struggles and its faults. In many ways the artistic style is different from Rivera in the way that it is very large and dramatic. It feels at times less grounded and very abstract in its composition, compared to Rivera's realistic rural scenes. But in Orozco's Dartmouth murals, one sees Cortez's arrival drawn in a way to show it as one of the worst moments in history, quite literally shown in the painting with its stark colors and deafening background. Orozco also paints Latin America, showing a farmer Zapata guerrilla fighter being

4 Andrew Briden

stabbed in the back, an image that tells one so much about the Mexican Revolution's treatment of rural farmers.

In essence, Mexican Muralism is an art style that transcends the complicated realities of Mexican identity and story. Who we are and where we come from are often truths that bring about a sense of pride and stability. When people are colonized, their ability to tell their own story is taken away from them. Rivera's History of Mexico mural reveals the way in which a country can reclaim its tumultuous and revolutionary history. Without art, there would be no true way to express the realities of history.

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