
This year marks the centennial of the Mexican Revolution, a violent and destructive conflict, but one which also gave birth to what is arguably Latin America’s most famous art movement, the Mexican Muralist movement. The literature on the Movement is immense, posing a real challenge to the researcher. What is there left to say about an art movement which married Renaissance fresco with violent, nationalist, and indigenous imagery?

A great deal, according to Anna Indych-Lopez, whose new book examines how the work of José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Siqueiros was received at exhibitions in the United States. Indych-López acknowledges the earlier work of Laurance Hurlburt well as that of Dawn Adaes, et al., but she is after something else: how the muralists fulfilled, or failed to, American expectations of Mexican cultural character, revolutionary fervor, and folkloric rural identity.

She examines, for example, the discordance between Orozco’s public murals in Mexico, which stressed a heroic view of the Revolution, with his sketches called Horrors (Horrores), privately produced and sold in the United States, which expressed a Goya-esque revulsion at the blood the Revolution spilt. The sketches opened the doors to Orozco as an artist in New York, but widened the perceived gap between him and his compatriots. Rivera, on the other hand, the leftist and revolutionary prophet par excellence, more than amply fulfilled the “United States public’s expectation of cultural nationalism from Mexican art” (p.75). His participation, and that of Siqueiros in the “Mexican Arts” exhibitions mounted at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1930, sealed their identification with “folkloric” Mexico. How that folkloric and “mythic” image was promulgated in American collecting and artistic circles makes up the bulk of the book. Indych-López does not analyze Rivera at Rockefeller Center, nor Siqueiros in Los Angeles, nor even Orozco at Dartmouth. Rather, she explores how revolutionary and indigenous images were promulgated in American collecting and artistic circles, and how Mexican “heroic” and folk themes influenced American artists after the Revolution.

Indych-López’s research is first-rate. She has made extensive use of the diaries of Anita Brenner, the Mexican-born reporter and chronicler of the early Muralist Movement. She has also scoured American newspapers and magazines of the period. She is au courant with the latest literature on the movement, citing the leading writers on Muralism, as well as contemporary Mexican cultural historians such as Claudio Lomnitz. The book’s ample illustrations crisply illuminate her thesis. This book is aimed at an advanced audience, one already familiar with the story of los tres grandes and their work.

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