

The mexican muralism movement



Art is in constant flux, it never seems to stay stagnant. However, there is a reason for that, art serves different roles depending on the time periods, cultures, or societal aspect, which results in it constantly changing. Thus, an art movement is a period of time when popular art shares similar styles or goals and it can last for a couple of months or years varying on the importance or popularity of that art. For instance, the Mexican muralism movement, which started in Mexico, took place in the early twentieth century and lasted for about fifty years. Murals, during this time, were painted on walls or any big public surface where anyone could see them. Most murals consisted of social realism in order to convey real socio-political conditions in the country. The biggest contributors during the Mexican muralist movement were Mexican painters David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco. They were the reason the Mexican muralist movement took off and lasted as long as it did. The Mexican muralism movement not only brought art to the masses but promoted pride and nationalism in a country rebuilding after the revolution.

The Mexican muralist movement began soon after the Mexican Revolution, which took place from 1910 to 1920. After the revolution, the government took on the very difficult project of transforming a divided Mexico. During this time, there was a concern with defining Mexican identity thus the government sought to establish a brand new Mexican society founded on its rich tradition but very much forward looking. They also wanted a way to promote pride and nationalism in the Mexican people. From all these desires the muralism movement arose. The movement began as a government funded form of public art, they commissioned artists to create art that would

illustrate Mexican history. Since most of the population was illiterate, the Mexican government went with murals as an effective way to spread the message of pride and nationalism visually (Souter, 2018). And so, Mexican muralism became a vital part of the country's new identity in the making. Public buildings across the nation were painted with murals using a variety of techniques. Common themes depicted in the murals included the “ promotion of indigenous Mexican culture, aspects of the Mexican revolution, communist struggle for social justice, the mixed-race mestizo identity, Latin American and Mesoamerican cultural history” (Mexican Murals, 2018). Although mural painting had been an abandoned art form in Mexico, the muralism movement brought mural painting back as a respected and wide spread artistic form with a strong social intent. From this point on, mural painting became one of the most dominant forms of art in Mexican culture.

As mentioned before, the Mexican Muralist movement was an independent movement. In fact, many of its early artists rejected external influences and used this method of muralism to achieve personal expression. The movement overall proved that art was a valid communication tool outside of the confines of a gallery and museums. Although there were many artists that took part in this movement, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco became the three key muralists of the movement. They later came to be referred as Los Tres Grandes, The Three Greats. Siqueiros, Rivera and Orozco believed that art was the highest form of human expression. Together, between 1920 and 1950, they created a style that defined Mexican identity following the Revolution. Through their art, they reinforced nationalism, as well as giving a powerful identity to the

Mexican people. They promoted “ the accurate idea of a Mexican identity as a mestizo nation with the indigenous people promoted, as well as the Spanish ancestry” (Herz, 2017). Their work also reflected their own experiences during the Revolution. Despite the close collaboration, the work of each artist was very distinctive. Each one had a different personality, ideology, and style. Each artist was free to work in his own style with his own techniques and views since the government didn't set any limitations. Although they all had their own style, they shared the common portrayal of “ Aztec warriors battling the Spanish in their fight for independence, humble peasants fighting in the Revolution, and common laborers of Mexico City” in their work (Bravo, 2014). They influenced each other greatly overall.

Diego Rivera was the most famous and the most traditional artist of the three. He included much of European modernism in his work, “ particularly elements of cubism” (Pomade, 2007). He took what he learned from European modernism and mixed it with the art of ancient Mexico and came up with a new form that allowed him to express his social and political ideas. Rivera depicted his people in his work as “ noble and glorious, saluting their history and heritage and paying homage to the hard workers in the most respectful way” (Kordic, 2016). The subject of Rivera's murals reflected his appreciation of Mexico's history and its indigenous cultures. He made Mexican people not only the subject of his work but the heroes of them. His murals remain as the most recognizable ones even today.

One of Rivera's most famous murals is *The History of Mexico* . He painted this mural in the stairways and stairwells of the National Palace in Mexico City. It took him six years to finalize the mural, he started painting it in 1929

and completed it in 1935. The mural itself consists of four main sections showcasing the history of Mexico from early native Aztec world to the future/present Mexico. The different walls surrounding the staircase portray “important historical events like the conquest, the colonial period, the independence movement, the revolution, the 1920’s, the 30’s and the present Mexico” (Becerra, 2017). The north wall displays the “richness of the ancient Aztec culture including the people and their traditional costumes” (Becerra, 2017). The west wall is the central part of the mural and summarizes the history of Mexico as a “series of conflicts, rebellions and revolution against oppression. These are scenes of hatred and war” (Becerra, 2017). Lastly, the south wall is about the future of Mexico. It shows “factories, the Soviet flag, workers, and Frida Kahlo and her sister as socialist teachers” (Becerra, 2017). The images here are all about progress, prosperity, and a better future. In this mural, Rivera essentially declared that the Mexican Revolution brought justice to the Mexican people who had been long oppressed by foreign powers. It also illustrated the struggle of the people in the Revolution. The story of the mural is one of good vs. evil.

Moving along, David Alfaro Siqueiros was the youngest and most radical of Los Tres Grandes. He was also the most innovative since he used unusual techniques in his murals, such as “pyroxene, a commercial enamel and Duco, a transparent automobile paint” (Pomade, 2007). Siqueiros was driven by the desire to initiate a new type of mural painting that included modern technology so he incorporated science, technology and machinery into his work while still holding on to the primary task of conveying a message to the common people. Although his art promoted progress, he also

promoted a political vision that wasn't well received by authorities in Mexico and the U. S. Nevertheless, he remained as one of the three key artists of the movement.

Siqueiros created many murals but one of his most famous murals is the *Torment and Apotheosis of Cuauhtémoc* . These two murals were painted at the Museum of the Palace of Fine arts in 1950-51. In the Torment of Cuauhtémoc, Siqueiros illustrates the violence that came with the Spanish conquistadores. It shows the Spanish torturing the Aztec emperor. Meanwhile, in the Apotheosis of Cuauhtémoc, the “ what if story” is illustrated. In other words, Siqueiros illustrates what it would be like if Cuauhtémoc's army had defeated the Spanish army. All in all, these murals were meant to explore the violent period of the conquest as well as Siqueiros's view of Mexican history.

Lastly, Jose Clemente Orozco was the most pessimistic of the three artists. He emphasized his work in human suffering and cruelty. He left nothing out when it came to the horrors of the Mexican Revolution, in which he fought. He often illustrated executions by firing squads, pillaging, and rape. Unlike Rivera and Siqueiros, his intentions were to show that not everything was great and perfect in Mexico. This often exposed him to much criticism. In fact, his murals were often “ defaced and even threatened to be whitewashed by the government for their explicitly straightforward content” (Pomade, 2007). However, that didn't stop him and he continued to create murals.

One of Orozco's most famous murals is *The Destruction of the Old Order*. He painted this mural in 1926 at the National Preparatory school in Mexico City. The mural illustrates two peasant men looking behind themselves at "the nineteenth century neoclassical structures contorting into a crumbling pile" (Audrey, 2017). The meaning that Orozco tried to illustrate with this mural was that of renovation. The crumbling structure behind the men is meant to symbolize the downfall of the past order. He created an "implication that as soon as the men turned back around they would be faced with the beginnings of a new order" (Audrey, 2017). In other words, this piece is meant to illustrate the achievement that the revolution brought to the Mexican people. The crumbling structure is meant to symbolize the end to that period of oppression.

There is no question that Los Tres Grandes not only created amazing murals with strong political messages but also had a strong influence on how art is perceived in the twentieth century. They influenced the techniques and styles of subsequent artists and forced many to re-examine the role of art in society. They were able to reorient history, recover lost stories, draft new narratives and even inspire artists like the Chicano muralists that emerged in the U. S. During the Chicano movement in the 1960's, Mexican-Americans were discriminated against and one of the ways they spoke up was by painting murals to depict Chicano lifestyle and their hardships, all while conveying the message that they were Americans as well. Although murals are usually painted on street walls or government buildings, today murals can be seen anywhere, most of the time displaying some form of unity in the community. Additionally, the muralist movement also opened the doors for

street art, which is most commonly known as graffiti. Although graffiti might not be seen as art by some people, there is graffiti out there that illustrates strong political messages. All in all, although the Mexican muralist movement is long gone, there are pieces from it that can still be found in art works today, which illustrates how Mexican muralism was a heavy predecessor of today's public art.

To sum up, the Mexican muralist movement was vital for Mexico when it needed a new identity in wake of the Mexican Revolution. The Mexican government promoted Mexican pride and identity by funding murals to spread political and social messages for its large illiterate population. Los Tres Grandes were big factors in launching and keeping the muralism movement alive for as long as it did. Without a doubt, the Mexican muralist movement was at its apex when Los Tres Grandes were at the helm. For that reason, Los Tres Grandes and their art work will forever be linked to the Mexican muralist movement. Lastly, the influence of the Mexican muralist movement, as mentioned before, is still prevalent in today's art world, it has even made its way beyond Mexico's borders. Mexican muralism was an important art movement to the art world and its impact will never be forgotten.

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