Art and Revolution: Mexican Muralism, Visual Culture, and Political Expression

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Introduction

This book examines muralism as a central form of visual culture in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Mexico: a practice that simultaneously produced monumental images, shaped state pedagogy, animated popular political imaginaries, and travelled beyond national borders to influence movements across the Americas and beyond. Centered on the canonical contributions of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, Art and Revolution situates the Mexican mural tradition within broader processes of educational reform, nation building, and working-class politics while also tracing how subsequent generations — including feminist and indigenous artists — contested and transformed those visual narratives. My aim is neither to canonize nor to dismiss muralism, but to map its complexities: aesthetic, political, institutional, and transnational.

Methodologically, the book combines close visual analysis with archival research, institutional history, and interviews. It treats murals as material-cultural objects — surfaces that weather, are restored, photographed, reproduced, and reimagined — and as pedagogical devices deployed in classrooms, marketplaces, and municipal plazas. Attention to technique (fresco, encaustic, mixed media), to sites (schools, labor unions, government palaces), and to circuits of circulation (prints, exhibitions, political delegations) allows us to follow how meaning was made, contested, and remade. Importantly, the study foregrounds voices and practices that have too often been excluded from muralist histories: women artists, indigenous creators, and community collectives whose interventions complicate narratives of state patronage and heroic authorship.

Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros are central not only because of the scale of their work but because each embodied a different relationship to politics, technique, and the public. Rivera’s monumental allegories of labor and national synthesis, Orozco’s tragic and often ambivalent humanism, and Siqueiros’s experimental techniques and militant internationalism form three axes through which the history of Mexican muralism can be read. Chapters devoted to each artist examine major programs and individual murals, the institutional contexts that produced commissions, and the ways critics, politicians, and publics responded. Yet the book also insists that a focus on the “big three” should not occlude the many other participants — assistants, women muralists, indigenous painters, and municipal organizers — whose labor and vision shaped the movement’s daily practice.

Beyond the personalities, muralism must be understood as an instrument of public pedagogy. The early post-revolutionary state invested in visual programs through the Secretaría de Educación Pública and other agencies to foster literacy, civic identity, and social reform. Murals were designed to teach as much as to decorate; they staged narratives of history, labor, and national destiny. At the same time, these official programs met resistance, provoked censorship battles, and produced unintended effects when murals were reinterpreted by workers, students, and community groups. Chapters in the middle section of the book examine these institutional tensions, the craft of mural making, and the ways images circulated domestically and internationally — from Mexico City’s public palaces to union halls in the United States and exhibitions in Europe.

The book concludes by following muralism’s afterlives: how community mural projects, feminist collectives, indigenous artists, and street art movements have taken up and transformed muralist vocabularies; how conservation and decay have become political acts; and how digital archives and reproductions have both extended and flattened meanings. The final chapters consider contemporary debates about memory, monumentality, and the ethics of preservation, asking what it means to inherit a tradition born of revolution in an era of neoliberal governance and global migration.

Readers will find in these pages a layered history: political and aesthetic, local and transnational, material and photographic. Whether approaching muralism from art history, cultural studies, education, or political history, this book invites rethinking walls as sites of struggle and pedagogy — places where art worked to make citizens and where citizens remade art. My hope is that Art and Revolution offers tools for understanding how public images continue to shape collective life and for imagining visual practices that answer the social and political questions of our time.

CHAPTER ONE: The Visual Roots: Pre-Revolutionary Art and Popular Imagery

Before the thundering cannons and revolutionary fervor of 1910, Mexico was far from an artistic blank slate. A rich tapestry of visual culture, woven from ancient indigenous traditions, colonial influences, and emerging modern sensibilities, already existed. Understanding this pre-revolutionary landscape is crucial to grasping the seismic shift and deliberate artistic construction that would become Mexican muralism. It's like knowing the ingredients before you taste the chef's masterpiece – you appreciate the transformation all the more.

For millennia, art in the region now known as Mexico was deeply intertwined with daily life, religion, and the ruling classes. Mesoamerican civilizations like the Olmecs, Mayans, and Aztecs produced monumental sculptures, intricate ceramics, textiles, and vibrant murals that adorned their temples and palaces. These ancient works depicted gods, animals, and celestial bodies, serving as crucial cultural documents. The Olmecs, often called the "mother culture" of Mesoamerica, left behind colossal stone heads and jade carvings that influenced later civilizations. Mayan art was known for its detailed carvings, mural painting, and hieroglyphic writing, while Aztec art centered on religious beliefs, with codices documenting their history and mythology. Indeed, traditional mural painting dates back to the pre-Hispanic period, with examples found at sites like Bonampak and Cacaxtla. Even long before the Spanish arrived, murals were being painted, such as the 1,800-year-old "Mural of the Drinkers" in Cholula, which depicts people consuming *pulque*, an alcoholic beverage, in what appears to be a ritualistic context. This long history of public, narrative art laid an unconscious groundwork for what was to come.

The arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century introduced European styles and techniques, leading to a unique blend of indigenous and European art forms. For 300 years under colonial rule, art remained largely tied to religion, with most works associated with churches and their decoration. Indigenous artists, though trained in European methods, often incorporated subtle native elements into their creations. This era saw the rise of Baroque and Rococo styles in religious art and architecture. The establishment of the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City in 1785 formalized

European-style art education. This academy became a hub for artistic training, but its emphasis on European aesthetics sometimes restricted the development of a distinct national artistic identity. However, even within this European framework, some artists, like Miguel Cabrera, advocated for an official art academy, showing a growing recognition of the art produced in New Spain.

The 19th century, following Mexico's independence in 1821, saw a burgeoning interest in national and indigenous themes. Romanticism and Neoclassicism, popular in Europe, found their way into Mexican painting and sculpture. Landscape painters like José María Velasco became prominent, depicting the natural beauty of Mexico and contributing to the shaping of a national identity through their art. Velasco, for instance, painted the Valley of Mexico multiple times from different perspectives, even incorporating scientific fields like botany and geology into his studies to expand his artistic skills.

However, the late 19th and early 20th centuries were largely defined by the Porfiriato, the long dictatorship of President Porfirio Díaz. While Díaz's rule brought a period of economic development and modernization, it also led to significant social inequality, with reforms largely benefiting the upper classes and foreign nationals. Art during this era, particularly in official circles, often mimicked European trends, especially French styles in architecture, as Díaz sought to present a modern, European-aligned image of Mexico to the world. Monumental architecture, such as the Palace of Fine Arts and the Monument to the Angel of Independence, was built, reflecting European influences and aiming to establish a sense of national power. Yet, this emphasis on European culture often came at the expense of indigenous Mexican traditions.

Despite the prevailing European aesthetic of the Porfiriato, a vibrant undercurrent of popular imagery and folk art persisted and, in many ways, thrived. This was the visual culture of the masses, often overlooked by official academies but deeply ingrained in everyday life. Think of the colorful ex-votos, retablos, and religious folk art that adorned homes and chapels. These pieces, often painted on tin, told personal stories of faith, gratitude, and miracles. Alongside these were popular prints and broadsides, widely distributed and consumed by a largely illiterate population.

Perhaps the most significant figure in this realm of popular printmaking was José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913). Posada, a political printmaker from Aguascalientes, used relief printing to create a vast body of popular illustrations that captured the essence of Mexican social life in the years leading up to the Revolution. His powerful, yet often humorous, engravings reached a wide audience, offering a penetrating view of Mexican society. Posada was a master of satire, lampooning politicians and illustrating the daily lives, beliefs, and struggles of ordinary people, often highlighting government abuses and the exploitation of the common populace.

His most enduring and recognizable works are his *calaveras*, skeletal figures that,

while playful, offered pointed social and political critiques. His most famous *calavera*, La Calavera Catrina, initially a satirical portrait of Mexican elites imitating European fashions, has become an iconic image associated with Day of the Dead celebrations. Posada's work was popular with the less privileged, who appreciated his humor and commentary on their suffering and the hypocrisy of the elites. He defied the norm of revering Spanish art, often drawing from pre-conquest imagery and traditions. Posada's influence on the future muralists, particularly José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera, was profound. Rivera himself acknowledged his debt to Posada, even including the engraver's portrait in some of his most important murals. Posada's art, with its vigorous and often nationalistic spirit, laid a crucial groundwork for the Mexicanidad, or Mexican identity, that the muralist movement would later embrace.

Another key figure who challenged the prevailing artistic norms of the Porfiriato was Gerardo Murillo (1875–1964), better known as Dr. Atl. Atl, an artist and writer, was a fervent proponent of a new, genuinely Mexican art, distancing himself from his Spanish heritage by adopting the Nahuatl word for water, "Atl," as his pseudonym. He studied in Europe but returned to Mexico convinced that Mexican art needed a revolution. In 1906, even before the armed conflict erupted, Dr. Atl penned a manifesto advocating for a new art movement that would resonate with the interests and realities of the Mexican people. This document, seen and admired by artists like Diego Rivera, was a significant precursor to the muralist movement.

Dr. Atl's own artistic output, often featuring Mexican landscapes and volcanoes, sought to blend indigenous art with modern expression. He also famously invented "Atlcolor," a versatile substance for painting on various surfaces, including plaster. His anti-academic sentiments and belief that Mexican art needed a revolution were a stark contrast to the stifled creativity he perceived at the Academy of San Carlos, which he would later direct. He actively encouraged and taught many artists of the next generation, including Orozco, Siqueiros, and Rivera, even pressuring his wealthier friends to buy Rivera's works to fund his first trip to Europe. Atl's efforts to promote a nationalist, indigenous Mexican art, and his emphasis on art being connected to social and political revolution, were pivotal in shaping the artistic landscape that would give rise to muralism.

The pulquerías, humble taverns where the fermented agave drink *pulque* was consumed, also served as unconventional canvases for popular art. While not academic in nature, the murals found in these establishments offered a glimpse into a vernacular visual culture, often depicting scenes of daily life, revelry, and folklore. These informal murals, created by anonymous artists, were a direct expression of popular taste and a raw counterpoint to the refined European styles favored by the elite. They were a testament to the idea that art could exist outside of institutions and speak directly to the people. This tradition of public, accessible, and often narrative wall painting, though distinct in its execution and intent from the later muralist movement, nevertheless contributed to a visual environment where large-scale

imagery had a place in public spaces and in the collective consciousness.

The pre-revolutionary period, therefore, was a complex visual melting pot. While the official art scene largely looked to Europe for inspiration, figures like Posada and Dr. Atl were already championing a distinctly Mexican artistic identity, drawing from indigenous roots and popular culture. The widespread accessibility of prints, postcards, and popular imagery meant that visual narratives, even those critical of the establishment, were already circulating among the populace. This rich and often contradictory visual heritage, marked by both foreign influence and a nascent nationalism, provided the fertile ground from which the monumental, politically charged art of the Mexican Muralist movement would dramatically emerge. It was a time of quiet rumblings and visual experiments, a prelude to the artistic earthquake that was about to shake Mexico.
