

I

INTRODUCTION

The Circulation of Mexican Muralism in the United States

The Mexican muralist movement emerged after a decade of violence and civil strife, from 1910 to 1920, when political and cultural leaders attempted to consolidate the social ideals of the Revolution, among them being the educating of the populace and the forging of a nationalist consciousness. To this end, artists such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaró Siqueiros exploited the public mural as an instrument of social and cultural transformation. At the same time, they exported their production in both mural and small-scale form to the United States, where their nationalistic imagery captured the imagination of the art-viewing public in the late 1920s and the 1930s. In the United States, interest in the imagery displayed on the public walls of Mexico coincided with a broader popular fascination with Mexican culture.

Most of the museum-going public in the United States, however, could not examine these murals in Mexico directly. Portable frescoes, large- and small-scale easel paintings, works on paper, and photographic reproductions were vital in transmitting the Revolutionary rhetoric of Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros to U.S. audiences. Though they initially rejected the easel picture as “bourgeois,” the muralists embraced the economy of small-scale media as a strategy for obtaining mural commissions in the United States.¹ The fo-

cus here is what Francisco Reyes Palma has called “transplanted” muralism, which came to the fore during a dynamic historical period when smaller-scale works had to speak for murals and capitalist patrons courted the Revolution’s artists.²

The exportation of Mexican muralism to the United States entailed several seemingly paradoxical yet interrelated phenomena: the potential for smaller works to stand in for monumental murals, the ability of Mexican muralists to project nationalist imagery in a transcultural dialogue, and the capacity of U.S. viewers to reconcile these paradoxes within the sociopolitical context of hemispheric relations. While some scholars have referred to the “enormous vogue of things Mexican” in this era, the specific strategies, processes, and networks by which the muralists both engaged and resisted “south of the border” culture have yet to be theorized properly.³ At stake is the question of how U.S. perceptions of Mexican cultural identity inflected the creative processes of the muralists, their politics, and the aesthetic and social histories of their murals.

During the 1920s, Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros painted monumental mural cycles in high-profile government buildings in Mexico’s capital. The period of post-Revolutionary struggle featured an overwhelming cultural nationalism, the problem of national consolidation, and eventually the formation of the state. As the Mexican government and the post-Revolutionary elite codified their own version of national history, they called on indigenous peoples, the mestizo, folk culture, popular and native traditions, and pre-Columbian mythology to assert Mexico’s own brand of hybrid modernity. Artists and intellectuals participated in the construction of a national iconography, and in so doing, many colluded with this state-sponsored aesthetic *indigenismo*.

Like their political counterparts, artists and intellectuals represented a factionalized community rather than a coherent “movement” and often proposed competing definitions of national identity. The socially committed art of the muralists competed with other practices as well as more internationally oriented, cosmopolitan vanguards such as *estridentismo* (a movement that joined artists and poets in an attempt to renovate Mexican culture through the iconography of modern technology).⁴ Further, the so-called *tres grandes* of muralism argued bitterly among themselves and fought publicly to assert their individual and distinct visions of Mexico.⁵ Although early responses to the murals in Mexico were negative and critics condemned them and their depictions of native peoples as “ugly,” the institutionalization of muralism quieted the early public outcry, transforming the movement into a monumental national art form. International recognition helped to homogenize muralism and the claims of Revolutionary and cultural nationalism.

At various times throughout the late 1920s and the 1930s, Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros established long-term residence in the United States. During their stays, they created a variety of murals in nongovernmental contexts, such as the luncheon club of the Pacific Stock Exchange in San Francisco (Rivera, 1930–1931); the cafeteria of Pomona College in Claremont, California (Orozco, 1930); and the private home of filmmaker Dudley Murphy in Los Angeles (Siqueiros, 1932). Unlike the monumental cycles painted on several floors of such grand buildings as the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (National Preparatory School) or the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Ministry of Education) in Mexico City, the murals in the United States were primarily single-paneled, in private or relatively inaccessible settings, and not part of a larger decorative scheme or a specific governmental platform. While the Mexico City murals were made for the elite urban classes of the capital and their accessibility is debatable (Mary K. Coffey has argued persuasively on this subject), they were more open to the public than, for instance, Rivera's mural for the private lunch club of a stock exchange or Orozco's mural confined to the student cafeteria of a private college.⁶ Whereas in the United States these artists sometimes used the Mexican themes or imagery of social revolution that had been codified in their earlier murals in Mexico, most of their U.S. murals featured iconography adapted to the particular circumstances and environments of the commissions—the power of modern industry that inspired Rivera or the mysticism and classicism of the Delphic Circle that Orozco embraced.⁷ The comparatively smaller and fewer murals in the United States by Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros featured principally atypical imagery lacking the cultural nationalism that had come to be expected of the three painters. For that reason, these works did not play a significant role in the reception of muralism in the United States.⁸

The exportation of Mexican muralism to the United States was emblematic of this period during which the muralists developed their Revolutionary language and reconsidered their artistic strategies in an effort to reach international audiences. Exhibition culture and circulation networks within the United States profoundly affected Mexican muralism, dictating a dependency between the murals and the portable works created for U.S. audiences on the one hand and the artists and their new patrons on the other. Portable works with Mexican subject matter by Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros were featured across the United States in group gallery shows. In these exhibitions, modern Mexican art was often displayed alongside pre-Columbian objects, as well as folk arts and crafts, thereby introducing the public to the work of the muralists within the context of a broader commercial interest in ancient artifacts and tourist objects. How, one might ask, could U.S. audiences understand

Mexican muralism without seeing the murals? And how was it possible to exhibit muralism without murals?

When the Revolutionary images by Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros circulated in the United States, socially engaged art rivaled abstraction as an alternative form of modernist expression. During the turbulent 1930s, the nationalistic imagery of the artists played into hemispheric concerns about “Americanism.” Yet there was also a rural, depoliticized, and folkloric vision of Mexico in the United States, and it intensified the expectations of the general public, the demands of institutional patrons, and the critical reception of the artists’ work. Orozco and Siqueiros were wary of such folkloric interpretations, but, like Rivera, they often altered their imagery to accommodate new audiences.

In the 1920s, not long after news reports in the United States about the Mexican Revolution had broadcast the image of a war-torn, violent bandito culture, the radical and politicized subject matter of the muralists proved distasteful to some. In an effort to make Mexican art more palatable to U.S. viewers, institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) were complicit in wider attempts to use it as a tool of cultural diplomacy. The well-documented appropriation of Latin American, and specifically Mexican, art for political purposes has eclipsed and overdetermined discussions of U.S.–Mexican cultural relations. It has also obscured a systematic evaluation of the aesthetic practices and networks developed between the two countries and of the position of muralism within the socially engaged modernism of the decade. As U.S. viewers grew increasingly aware of muralism, the task of willfully depoliticizing it became more difficult. The divide between the public’s original expectations about Mexican art and their willingness to understand the artistic goals behind it grew narrower. By exploring the decisive shift in how Mexican muralists were understood in the United States, this study questions assumptions about the hegemony of U.S. cultural institutions and their ability to use Mexican culture to serve ideological and political interests. In doing so, it aims to reconstitute the politics of Latin American and modern art history.

A number of considerations have motivated this reevaluation: the need to challenge art historical accounts that codify artistic production into discrete categories of media and geography; the desire to debunk myths of cultural prestige that have hampered a more refined understanding of how Mexican art came to prominence in the United States in the 1930s; and the goal of providing an alternative vision of cultural modernity that incorporates modern Mexican art into the unfolding story of international modernism. While this study does address the work of some well-known artists, it primarily features an aspect of muralism that is rarely discussed. The literature on Mexican mu-

ralism is extensive, and some might think exhaustive, yet I resist traditional accounts of the murals by arguing that these works cannot be adequately understood without an examination of attendant small-scale works. That category includes works on paper created for export by Orozco; three major exhibitions of Mexican art in the United States; and the manipulation of a new medium—the portable fresco. With this focus, one can weigh the cultural activities of the muralists against the public responses to their production, as well as the cultural politics of modern Mexico and the United States. My approach suggests the extent to which transnational dialogues about the urban and the rural, abstraction and figuration, and nationalism and internationalism fashioned Mexican modernity.

Central to this project is the concept of canon formation and an understanding of how Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros came to dominate the art historiography of the period. I hope that my telling of this story will encourage others to amplify it.

The period between Orozco's arrival in the United States in 1927 for his second prolonged stay and the Museum of Modern Art's ambitious exhibition, "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art," in 1940, was one in which Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros were active in the United States. Orozco's longest residence in the United States was from 1927 to 1934.⁹ Rivera arrived in San Francisco in 1930 and traveled between Mexico and the United States intermittently throughout the decade, as did Siqueiros.

During these thirteen years, art patronage in Mexico and the United States differed significantly. The lack of an art market in Mexico made artists dependent on state sponsorship and income from work sold in the United States. The private Galería de Arte Mexicano in Mexico City did not open until 1935, and even then, the majority of its clients were from the United States. After an initial period of optimism and cooperative spirit during the Álvaro Obregón administration (1920–1924), many of the government commissions for art during the Plutarco Elías Calles regime (1924–1934) went to Rivera. Orozco came to the United States partly out of necessity. He had to earn a living, and so once public-sector employment in Mexico was destabilized, he received a small subsidy from Mexico's Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (Ministry of Foreign Relations) to establish himself in New York.¹⁰ Rivera came to the United States by way of his growing fame and a mural commission in San Francisco. Without the system of patronage that operated in Mexico, without the availability of government commissions in the United States, the muralists relied solely on individual clients, promoters, writers and critics, gallerists, curators, museum directors, and wealthy patrons. U.S. government sponsorship did play a small role in the promotion of Mexican art, however,

when the American Federation of Arts, a national agency with semiofficial capacity in the absence of a central arts program, sponsored the “Mexican Arts” exhibition of 1930–1932. Significantly, the exhibition was financed not by the government but by the private Carnegie Corporation.

Several pivotal figures promoted modern Mexican art and artists in the United States in the period preceding that under discussion here. The artist, gallerist, and exhibition organizer Marius de Zayas was key in bringing modern art to New York. He was first associated with Alfred Stieglitz’s Gallery 291 and later launched the magazine *291*. De Zayas went on to found his own galleries, the Modern and the De Zayas, and Rivera’s first showing in the United States was at the Modern Gallery in 1916. Besides exhibiting the most advanced art from Europe, de Zayas maintained a permanent display of African and Aztec sculpture. He often showcased modern art alongside indigenous art from Africa and Mexico. In October 1916, he juxtaposed works Rivera had painted in Europe with pre-Columbian objects from Mexico. At this early date, then, U.S. viewers were exposed to the art of Rivera as well as the pre-Conquest art of Mexico in the context of modernism.

One of the most influential and significant *animateurs* of Mexican culture in the early 1920s was the poet José Juan Tablada, who lived in New York from 1920 to 1936. Beginning in 1923, under the auspices of Mexico’s Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, this strident cultural nationalist organized conferences and exhibitions and wrote many articles about Mexican art that were issued in the United States. In 1923, he published both the first English-language article devoted to the work of Rivera and an article in *International Studio* that sought to “point out to the U.S. public the most prominent Mexican artists” of the day.¹¹ The following year, he introduced the public to the work of Orozco and laid the groundwork for New York’s reception of his drawings of the Mexican Revolution by calling the artist, to Orozco’s chagrin, “the Mexican Goya.”¹² It was Tablada who encouraged Orozco to come to New York, telling him in early 1927 that he had many admirers in New York “only because they have seen the pictures of yours that I possess.” He also mentioned to Orozco an invitation he had received from the director of the Brooklyn Museum to organize an exhibition of Mexican painters in which Orozco “would have the place that he deserves.”¹³ Tablada encouraged the young caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias to come to the United States as well and assisted in promoting his work when he arrived in 1923. As a result of Tablada’s efforts, Covarrubias’s caricatures appeared in *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker*, and Alfred A. Knopf published several collections of his portraits. Covarrubias was the first Mexican artist to achieve mainstream success in the United States. Tablada continued his crusade into the 1930s, after the muralists and other Mexican artists had arrived

in the United States. In addition to these activities, Tablada wrote a weekly column, “Nueva York de día y de noche” (“New York by Day and by Night”), for the Mexican newspaper *El universal*, which provides invaluable firsthand testimony to the Mexican presence in New York in the 1920s and early 1930s.

A number of prominent figures followed Tablada in promoting Mexican culture in the United States: Anita Brenner, Frances Flynn Paine, Alma Reed, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, René d’Harnoncourt, Carl Zigrosser, Walter Pach, and Lewis Mumford, among others. Many of the figures involved in one way or another with the muralists—Rockefeller, Mumford, Juliana Force, Charles Sheeler, Edith Halpert—were also interested in American folk art. Art professionals in the United States forged a national identity in the arts by developing a theory of a “usable past,” and their interest in Mexican art showed similar concerns. The Museum of Modern Art (and thus the Rockefellers) played a significant role in the promotion and exhibition of the muralists’ work.

With the considerable differences between art patronage in the United States and Mexico, the terms “public” and “private” assume different meanings in each context. Renato González Mello has discussed at some length the conceptual and epistemological questions at the heart of the muralists’ production in the United States.¹⁴ This book, in turn, considers the very public life of private paintings and works on paper by the muralists in the United States during this period.

I do not attempt to trace the influence of the muralists on artists in this country, and therefore I do not examine U.S. artists’ responses to their work. I look instead at institutional patronage, collecting practices, the artists’ own motivations, and the critical reception of their work primarily in the popular press and in specialized art journals. In measuring the impact of the muralists on the popular cultural imagination of the United States, I analyze the mainstream interpretation of muralism presented in art periodicals, daily newspapers, and contemporary criticism. Because there are no oral histories or contemporaneous accounts from the general public, I necessarily refer to museum-goers, art viewers, and art critics at various presses. A discussion of the reception of muralism in the United States would ideally take into account its distinct and varied communities of viewers: for example, Mexican American audiences in the Southwest, midwestern viewers, and a more elite element of the New York public.¹⁵ Yet, just as Mary Coffey has stated in regard to the Mexican context, there is no record from the 1930s in the United States of “any popular reception like the kind we find today in [visitor] surveys or ‘reader responses.’”¹⁶ While critics do not necessarily define public opinion, they clearly mold it, respond to it, and can often be an accurate, albeit not absolute, gauge of it. In relying on critical rather than popular reception, I follow the defini-

tion of “public” Thomas Crow used in reference to eighteenth-century French painting, whereby the public is understood as a “representation of the significant totality by and for someone. A public appears, with a shape and a will, via the various claims made to represent it.” Rather than suggest the “meaningful degree of coherence in attitude” that Crow assumes in the Parisian context, I attempt to account for the complexity of diverse audiences in the United States by examining, for example, the divergent beliefs of art critics such as Henry McBride, a defender of conservatism, and Elizabeth McCausland, a socially conscious writer and activist, both of whom wrote extensively about Mexican art and artists.¹⁷ Like Helen Langa in her crucial study of printmaking in New York in the 1930s, I understand critical reception as historically situated claims and work from the premise that by considering reception we may “see [how these works] resonate within their historical conditions of production [and] circulation” and speculate “about elements ignored or avoided by contemporary . . . audiences that later viewers might interpret differently.”¹⁸ I deliberately seek to illuminate the social historical context through reception. Nevertheless, I also use historically situated claims in order to rethink questions of canon formation and to view works of art as part of an ongoing historical process.

Despite the complexities of diverse audiences my examination reveals coherence in the expectations for a particular notion of Mexicanness from various U.S. publics. An analysis of the exhibition culture surrounding muralism in the United States and its attendant responses lays bare the constructs of perception about what constitutes Mexicanness. Given muralism’s specific intent to reach an audience (mass or elite, domestic or foreign), I explore how images circulate and how institutions, artists, and exhibition culture fabricated Mexicanness. I also explore the extent to which Mexicanness was expressed, understood, and exploited in the 1930s. The politics of cultural production, dissemination, and reception lie at the heart of this project.

In order to deconstruct the U.S. interpretation of Mexican muralism and modernity, I have organized this study in roughly chronological order. Subsequent chapters center on an exhibition or a series of works and move outward to consider the various networks (museum and gallery exhibitions, popular magazines, private collectors) for dialogues about muralism, despite the relative absence of murals. I also position muralism as a prime example of the alternative modernisms that flourished during the late 1920s and early 1930s. By capturing a historical moment when Mexican muralism first exploded on the scene in the United States, I appraise the artists’ own vantage points and strategies, as well as those of art institutions and the public, in the promotion of muralism. I thus examine the shifting claims made on Mexican mural-

ism and clarify the concept of “the public” for murals in the United States. Instead of surveying U.S. fascination with Mexican culture in general, this book focuses on the capacity of U.S. perceptions to affect the very production of Mexican art.

Orozco was not only the first muralist to arrive in the United States but also the first to accommodate his production for export to the north. He did so in the series *Los horrores de la revolución*, a group of works on paper that Orozco began in Mexico for U.S. clients. Further developed in response to U.S. reactions to the artist’s production, *Los horrores* was the first body of work that he exhibited in New York, and it is a critical link between his famous Escuela Nacional Preparatoria murals in Mexico City and the murals he would produce in the United States. Under the political pressures of the post-Revolutionary regime and after negative reactions to the violent imagery, Orozco elaborated and reconfigured this series, altering his work to accommodate both the expectations placed on a Mexican artist and the vicissitudes of the commercial marketplace in the United States.

Mexican art and muralism gained popularity in the United States largely because of the “Mexican Arts” exhibition that was organized by the American Federation of Arts and that traveled to fourteen U.S. cities between 1930 and 1932. Dwight Morrow, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico at the time, conceived the exhibition, and it included work by Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. Curated by René d’Harnoncourt, it sought to trace “authentic” Mexican culture through the simultaneous display of colonial, folk, and modern art. The early and contemporary folk art accounted for the show’s success; the three muralists’ paintings, with such subjects as workers, soldiers, and heroes of the Revolution, proved to be an ill-fitting conclusion to the exhibition and received unfavorable reviews.

The “Mexican Arts” exhibition appeared at a time when U.S. audiences were becoming aware of artistic developments in Mexico. The exhibition allowed them to view—firsthand, rather than in reproduction—large-scale easel pictures by the muralists. Yet the search for common American cultural origins, which in part had prompted the exhibition, colored its portrayal of Mexican nationalist art. The show presented modern Mexican art as a simplistic expression of rural folk values, and it essentially erased all signs of the political nature of the muralists’ production. In the end, “Mexican Arts” stripped the modern Mexican aesthetic of its Revolutionary connotations by reducing it to a romanticized illustration of the supposedly harmonious, rural character of Mexico. This biased promotion of artisanal, rural, and traditional values as “authentically” Mexican made the show quite popular, but it also elided the contribution of the muralists. By establishing a popular expectation

of “simplicity” and folk values in modern Mexican art in the early 1930s, the exhibition created an inauspicious environment for the development of muralism. With the precedent of the exhibition, the U.S. public’s responses to the muralists’ work showed marked tensions between the rural and the urban.

In December 1931, while “Mexican Arts” was making its eleventh stop, at the Art Institute of Chicago, a large retrospective of the work of Diego Rivera opened at the new Museum of Modern Art, offering New York museumgoers an unprecedented glimpse of his work to date. Murals, in short supply in “Mexican Arts,” claimed center stage at MoMA, as Rivera created eight portable fresco panels for the exhibition. This medium was a new one developed by the artist, and five of those panels received considerable critical attention. The five panels distilled the more politicized imagery of Rivera’s murals in Mexico. U.S. viewers had complex reactions to both the muralist’s subject matter and his formal technique. I argue, unlike most other authors, that MoMA’s attempts to depoliticize the work of the muralists were not successful and that the critics’ rejection of Rivera’s “watered-down” portable frescoes indicates that the public had begun to reach more informed conclusions about Mexican muralism. The artist’s unsuccessful attempts to replicate the conditions, practice, and imagery of muralism through the surrogate of the portable fresco influenced the next big exhibition of Mexican art in the United States, an exhibition whose organizers also grappled with the problem of how to present the work of the muralists to U.S. audiences.

Despite Rivera’s crisis with the portable fresco format, MoMA commissioned another movable mural, this one by Orozco, for that next big exhibition, entitled “Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art” (1940). Orozco had taken note of the criticisms leveled at Rivera’s panels, and his portable fresco, *Dive Bomber and Tank*, more closely approximated the scale and viewing conditions of public mural painting. Larger than Rivera’s earlier portable frescoes, *Dive Bomber* was made up of six interchangeable panels that could be read in various configurations, in the same way that the nonlinear narrative of certain mural cycles in Mexico carries over from wall to wall. Critics observed that in comparison with Rivera’s 1931 panels, *Dive Bomber* appeared less like a fragment of a mural ripped out of its context. By using formal manipulation and abstraction as metaphors for the construction of vision in general, Orozco summoned the experiential conditions of viewing a mural, and his portable fresco communicated the goals of Mexican public mural painting much more effectively than did Rivera’s earlier work. By evaluating the differences between Orozco’s movable mural and Rivera’s MoMA panels, I show how the critical responses to the muralists’ work affected the evolution of the portable medium and Mexican muralism in general. Despite its shortcom-

ings, “Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art” offered a more historically grounded “explanation” of muralism than did “Mexican Arts.” The public perception of Mexican muralism in the United States had matured sufficiently by the end of the 1930s to reconcile the political interpretations and the specific formal concerns of public mural painting.

By charting more than a decade of Mexican muralism in the U.S. cultural sphere, this book locates the production of Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros within the political, sociocultural, and aesthetic histories of modernism in the Americas. By weighing public reactions to their work during the cultural rejuvenation of the late 1920s and the 1930s, it also reviews our understanding of U.S.–Mexican cultural relations and seeks to expose the contradictions of the “enormous vogue for things Mexican.”

The border between the two nations continues to be fraught with competing, tangled histories. In light of that tension, this book analyzes the emergence of national cultural identities as one of many responses to the process of modernization in the Americas during the early twentieth century. In identifying the ways in which the U.S. public came to comprehend muralism in the 1930s, and the specific visual strategies used alternatively to convey and to downplay cultural nationalism, this study provides an opportunity to understand the fears and expectations that tumultuous change and transculturation pose for two neighboring nations locked in a tense interdependence.