The Mexican Mural Movement

**Important Terms:**
Avant Garde - vanguardia
*indigenismo*
Francisco ‘Pancho’ Villa
Emiliano Zapata
Partido Revolucionario Nacional (PNR)
Alvaro Obregón (Presidency, 1920-24)
José Vasconcellos
Diego Rivera (1886-1957)
David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974)
José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949)

Latin American avant-gardes of the 1920s-40s
The Latin American avant-garde was a postwar phenomenon that flowered in the early 1920s. It was not a belated version of earlier European art and literature, as some have argued, but rather a continuation of tendencies that were interrupted in Europe by WWI. This movement synthesized cubist and futurist elements with indigenous ideas of nationality. Chronologically, the Latin American avant-garde overlapped with *Modernismo*, often displacing it. Members of the avant-garde saw *Modernismo* as too romantic and not capable of expressing the ideas of a dynamic modern age.

The avant-garde movement was predominantly an urban phenomenon that coincided with the rise of *indigenismo*, a movement dedicated to the contemporary plight of Indians and to a sense of national pride in an ancient legacy that helped define cultural identities for artists as well as for the general public. Workers and Indians were the main subjects in the arts of the 1930s and 1940s in most countries, while in Mexico these depictions started in the 1920s. Artists from all countries were responding to nineteenth century idealized/romanticized depictions of a lost legacy by attempting to portray issues that pertained to contemporary indigenous populations. In the Caribbean and in Brazil, African-descended populations were also depicted.

In both literature and the arts, the avant-garde took two directions: an ideological one that focused on issues of national identity (Mexico and Cuba) and an aesthetic and cosmopolitan one with an international orientation (Argentina and Brazil).

Mexico City, c. 1920s-40s
Mexico City in the 1920s stood on the threshold of a new era. Although the country had won its independence from Spain in 1821, it became obvious by the early 1900s that the economic gap between rich and poor—and the social gap between the Spanish-descendants and Amerindian-descendants—had only increased following the departure of the Spanish. Sparked by the populist escapades of colorful bandit-turned-revolutionary Francisco ‘Pancho’ Villa and peasant-hero Emiliano Zapata, Mexico endured a decade of paralyzing civil war before the newly established
Partido Revolucionario Nacional (PNR) began steering the nation in a new, profoundly nationalist, socialist-inspired direction in 1920. The capital swarmed with optimism as the PNR vowed to make mestizaje—the blending of Amerindian and European patrimonies—the impetus for national change.

The Mexican Mural Movement (1920s-40s)
Three Mexican artists—Rivera Diego, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—Los tres grandes—have become strongly associated with mural painting and the sociopolitical art of that time. From the outset, the Mexican Muralist movement was linked to the official requirements of the post-revolutionary government. Artists and the government believed that art had a social and ideological function. Under the 1920-24 presidency of Alvaro Obregón, the government decided that public works of art could play an important role in restoring a nation tattered by civil war. As part of an ambitious cultural plan, expatriate Mexican artists were summoned to return from abroad to collaborate in a program of mural decoration of public buildings.

José Vasconcelos was Mexico’s Minister of Education under Obregón and was largely responsible for awarding the mural commissions. Vasconcelos had a universalist philosophy and wanted to create a “publicly visible art program as a complement to his new centralized national education policy” (Barnitz, 45). Early murals were not necessarily political, rather they were allegories of Mexico’s cultural history. These early murals also reflected Vasconcelos’s idea that a new cosmic race would result from the other races found in Latin America. The government’s main goal was similar to the sixteenth century friars who aimed to educate a broad and largely illiterate population.

It was decided that the murals would be painted on the vast, undecorated walls of Mexico’s governmental edifices. Like the Aztecs and Mayans of earlier eras, who painted on the walls of their temples and tombs, the Mexican muralists left their public buildings awash with color. Reminiscent of their Mesoamerican predecessors, they took native subjects as their inspiration. Instead of creating portraits of Spanish aristocrats, they glorified the everyday lives of the contemporary Amerindian population and Mexican peasants tilling the soil. The artists faced two major challenges: introducing a new public monumental art requiring special technical skills and creating an effective visual language for propaganda purposes.

Synthesis of pre-Conquest art and European art
Interest in European art:
The Mexican artists’ keen appreciation of the aesthetic values of pre-Conquest art stemmed directly from their exposure to Modern European art, particularly Paul Cézanne and the Cubist movement, and their awareness of basic similarities between Modern European art and indigenous Mexican art, which originated with a European interest in ‘primitive’ art. Also important in their decision to adopt the fresco as an artistic means, was their attraction to monumental art, particularly the murals of the Italian Renaissance and the Baroque traditions.

Interest in Pre-Conquest art and Mexican content:
While the colonial art of Mexico and Latin America had from time to time incorporated Indian decorative motifs—murals at Malinalco and Ixmiquilpan, for instance—the overall design concepts, styles, and techniques employed were always Spanish. A painted *bodegón* or pantry scene might contain corn and cacao instead of oranges and grapes yet it remained the patented European still life, muted in color and devoid of human presence.

The Mexican Modernist School abandoned the detached art of Europe and in favor of bold New World imagery full of color and human activity. Each of the artists went on to individualize their own styles but definite similarities remains. All three were involved in creating a new system of visual conceptualization of the Mexican character. Their similar stylistic approaches resulted in powerful imagery whose force could only be paired with the monumental quality of the mural. All three artists were socialists with differing degrees of Communist loyalty. They painted for the public and planned their murals accordingly.