

# THE ART OF RAMÓN CONTRERAS AND THE MEXICAN MURALISTS MOVEMENT



## THE MEXICAN MURALISTS MOVEMENT

The Mexican Muralist tradition was born from the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920. The revolution, which overturned the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz and was based on agrarian reform to overcome the power of the landowners, or *hacenderos*, was spearheaded in northern Mexico by Francisco Madero and Pancho Villa and in the south by Emiliano Zapata. In 1910, according to American art critic Mackinley Helm, “nowhere else in the world, not even in Victorian England, had bad taste in art and decoration been every so carefully nurtured as in Mexico during the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz.”

The Mexican Mural Movement began about 1913 when Mexican President Victoriano Huerta appointed Alfredo Martinez as director of the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plasticas. Gerardo Murillo (who called himself Dr. Alt) of Guadalajara painted the first modern mural in Mexico, and pioneered the idea that Mexican art should reflect Mexican life. After the revolution, the new government commissioned works of public art that supported and affirmed the values of the revolution and the Mexican identity: a broader knowledge of revolutionary history and the Mexican people’s pre-Columbian past.

Three muralists—“los tres grandes,” José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—became the internationally-known leaders of the mural movement. All believed that art, the highest form of human expression, was a key force in social revolution. Together, they created the Labor Union of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors and devoted themselves to large-scale murals illustrating the history of Mexico, its people, its society, and the revolution. Their work was not always received positively. All spent some time in the United States creating works of art.

In the late 1920s, Orozco painted the first murals in the United States at Pomona College in Claremont. Rivera, criticized as a “false revolutionist” in Mexico, moved to the United States in 1930 where he was considered the leading figure in Mexican muralism. He painted murals from San Francisco to New York before returning to Mexico in 1934. Siqueiros, the most controversial of the three, was exiled in 1932 and moved to Los Angeles where he painted three murals, including “Street Meeting” at the Chouinard School of Art and “Tropical America” on the Italian Hall at Olvera Street.

In the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Works Progress Administration to provide employment during the Depression. Through the WPA, the 1933 Public Works of Art Project allowed 3600 artists to create murals and sculptures for public buildings. Although most of the mural art from the United States was less provocative than that of the Mexican muralists, it was the U.S. attitude toward public art that in part allowed the employment of los tres grandes by public institutions in the United States during the 1930s. The influence of the Mexican muralists on public art as an accessible and socially-relevant movement continues through this day.