

Mexican Muralism: Revolution and Other Universal Themes

I. Course Description

i. Art within the socio-political environment of the Twentieth Century (the Modern World): Europe and the Americas

The twentieth century (1900) was to be the “Modern Century”, for great developments occurring so rapidly in every sphere —science, technology, medicine, psychology, architecture, invention— would transform the human condition. The century quickly delivered its wonders (the internal combustion engine, X-rays, powered flight); and this had an impact on the arts, challenging former ideas of reality and representation. However, this modern world would later turned first into a European and then a World War; many of the European empires -in Austro-Hungary, in Russia, in Germany- collapsed or saw revolution. The map of the nations changed again, and a new balanced of European and world power ensued. Bolshevism¹, a new ideology, emerged to claim history as its own. In the arts there were two “Modern” revolutions: the first a relatively optimistic one before 1914, and a second more despairing one after 1918², when tumult left by the war created the feeling that nothing was over, and turmoil would continue.

At the beginning of the Twentieth century some Latin American countries looked forward to comfortable futures based on continuing primary exporting. Although Latin America did not experience a class conflict (industrialized Europe did), a labor organization soon made its way in the most prosperous cities such as Argentina, Mexico and Chile —eventually leading to the only social event Latin America experienced in the first half of the century: the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920).

ii. The Mexican Revolution and a revolutionary art, *muralismo mexicano*

The Mexican Revolution opened the doors to social reforms³, unleashed a revolutionary artistic expression (Mexican muralism) and created a new genre (the novel of the Mexican Revolution)⁴. The Mexican muralists Diego Rivera (1886-1957), José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974) used mural painting (or fresco painting) keeping in mind its traditional intention: it has been throughout the history of humanity an important form of artistic, political and social expression. They will later establish a particular style. *Los Tres Grandes* (the Big Three, as they were known) traveled to the United States; there private organizations funded some of their works.

¹ The Russian Social Democratic Party, later renamed the Communist Party, after seizing power in the October Revolution of 1917.

² These are the years of the first World War (1914-1918).

³ Such as land reform, civil liberties, welfare and public health, an equal education and standards of living for all. These “social reforms” of course were not fully exercised, for while some (the rich) accumulated more, others (the poor) had nothing.

⁴ Given the impact of the Revolution, we will also read two novels that share the structure and thematic of *muralismo mexicano*.

Los Tres Grandes painted on city walls, churches, government buildings—in every public space of the country⁵. They considered mural painting the only true art for it contemplates the beliefs and ideals of the people. The Indigenous people (in particular the Aztecs and Mayas), the devastation and contribution of the Spanish conquest, the socio-political environment of Mexico, and visions of hope are some of the themes captured by the muralists. To this background (and from this background) two other painters added their touch, Rufino Tamayo (1899-1991) and Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). The Mexican muralists go beyond a Mexican reality; their murals embrace universal themes.

iii. The art of painting in Europe, North America and Mexico: Comparing/Contrasting the Realities

Barbara Haskell has observed the following about the United States:

[the country] entered the twentieth century with a youthful confidence about its place in the world. American technological ingenuity and manufacturing efficiency had made the country the world's largest industrial power and showcase of electricity and steel production. In no other nation were cities so dazzling illuminated or so assertively vertical; nowhere else was the revolution in communications and transportation so pervasive. Unparalleled economic prosperity among the wealthy elite had given a handful of Americans the highest standard of living in the world. At the same time, the nation assumed a more global and imperialist outlook with its victory in the Spanish-American War (1898) and the acquisition of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, Hawaii, and the Philippines. (11)⁶.

American artists certainly reflected this prosperous reality; the nation was indeed in the age of confidence. In Europe, especially in Paris, the 1920s was “the laboratory of ideas in the arts.” Although the cosmopolitan city suffered during the Great War, its great literary workshops continued to flourish. Paris became the crucible of the modern movements—a place of manifestos, wild exhibitions, and public outrages by the movements of Dada⁷ and Surrealism⁸. In Mexico, representative of a Latin American reality, the muralists discovered a new form of expression; theirs was a conscious-revolutionary art.

⁵ Thus, their art became accessible to every citizen.

⁶ Taken from her book, *The American Century: Art & Culture 1900-1950*

⁷ An early 20th-century international movement in art, literature, music, and film, repudiating and mocking artistic and social conventions and emphasizing the illogical and absurd.

⁸ A 20th-century avant-garde movement in art and literature that sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images. The movement grew out of symbolism and Dada and was strongly influenced by Sigmund Freud.

II. Course Objectives

- The student will be acquainted with a good deal of Mexico's history, culture and society. Thus understanding its contemporary state.
- The student will discover the relationship between historical circumstances and cultural and artistic developments by comparing the Mexican Revolution and the muralist movement to some of the historical circumstances that gave rise to various American artistic innovations.
- The student will acquire the necessary analytical tools to understand and interpret the arts.
- The student will use his/her experience with muralism to interpret his/her surrounding.

III. Textbooks

Azuela, Mariano. The Underdogs: A Novel of the Mexican Revolution. Translated by E. Jr Munguia, (revision and notes by Beth Jorgensen). Introduction, Ilan Stavans. Modern Library Classics, 2002.

Fuentes, Carlos. The Death of Artemio Cruz. Trans. Alfred Mac Adam. Farrar, Straus and Giroux (Revised edition 1991).

Langmuir, Erika. Narrative: The National Gallery Pocket Guide. Yale UP, 2003.

IV. Evaluation

In order to get the highest grade possible in this course (A), then you must comply with the following requirements: do all the reading, complete all assigned coursework on time (not only essays but—most importantly—our Discussion Board topics), hand in a midterm exam and a final exam. This is an asynchronous course (online course), which means that you must check our course via Blackboard on a regular basis. A computer and an Internet connection are your responsibility to access our course.

Course Outline

i. An Introduction to the Introductions

- I. An Introduction to Latin America at the beginning of the 20th Century.
 - A) *A Note on Mexican History*, John S. Brushwood.
 - B) *A Brief History of Latin America*, J.M. Roberts.
 - C) *Mexico: Revolution and Stability*, Edwin Williamson.

ii. An Introduction to Narrative/Narratology

- I. What's narrative/narratology?
- II. *Narrative and life*, H. Porter Abbott.
- III. *A comic strip example*, Seymour Chatman.
- IV. *Introduction: Every picture tells a story? Defining Narrative Painting*, Erika Langmuir (in Narrative).

iii. An Introduction to the Indians

- I. *The Aztecs*
- II. *The Mayas*

iv. An Introduction to the Mexican Muralists

(Profile and Murals on Blackboard)

- I. Diego Rivera (1886-1957)
- II. David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974)
- III. José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949)
- IV. Rufino Tamayo (1899-1991)
- V. Frida Kahlo (1907-1954)
- VI. The Murals: The Mexican Revolution And Other Universal Themes:
 - a) The vision of the Revolution (its origin-ideology-promise, ...)
 - b) The image of the Indigenous people (a way of life, ...)
 - c) The Walls of the City: The Public Art.
 - d) The Face and Force of Capitalism.
 - e) Traits of Socialism
 - f) The Torture of the Twentieth Century
 - g) Humanity within the Century

v. An Introduction to the writers, Mariano Azuela and Carlos Fuentes

(Profile on Blackboard)

- I. The Influence of the Muralists
 - a) Painting vs. Narration
- II. Azuela, The Underdogs.
 - a) The characters come to life.
- III. Fuentes, The Death of Artemio Cruz.
 - a) The character and his state of being.