



Study for *Prometheus* mural Pomona College Museum of Arts

Orozco

MAN OF FIRE

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FROM THE FILMMAKERS

In the 1970s as young art students, we both made pilgrimages to the great murals of Mexico. We were drawn to their vision of a social role for art. More than the others, the murals of José Clemente Orozco drew us back again and again. There was something daring about his compositions—dark in their meanings and risky in their style. His work evoked for us the sublime Spanish painter El Greco. He seemed to inhabit the same moral universe as Francisco Goya, while painting with the direct emotionality of German Expressionism. Somehow, Orozco managed to bridge the chasm between the socially conscious revolutionary art of the 1930s and the abstract expressionism of the Cold War era.

Like any film production, making *OROZCO: Man of Fire* was a journey. On a research trip to Mexico, we scoured bookstores for sources about Orozco, but the results were disheartening: the average art section carried five titles about David Alfaro Siqueiros, ten on Diego Rivera, and even more about the recently idolized Frida Kahlo (including memorabilia like clay Frida figurines). As for books about Orozco, we usually found none at all. But piecing his life together from out-of-print

DISCUSSION GUIDE

books, conversations with people who had known him, and his own writings, we discovered an extraordinary individual with an ambitious and humane vision of the role of art in society.

Orozco was one of the primary artistic innovators of the twentieth century. Along with his fellow Mexican muralists, he revived the fresco tradition. Unlike Italian Renaissance frescos, which celebrated a unified vision of the world and humanity's place within it, Orozco's frescos express a modernist sensibility that questions and deconstructs. He forged an original and remarkable synthesis in monumental murals that are imbued with a critical spirit, a savage irony, a terrible beauty.

Orozco had great tenacity and an unshakeable faith in his mission. He was a master painter (a genius really), and yet he faced tremendous obstacles in his long journey of becoming an artist. He didn't paint his first mural until he was 40 years old. Not many of us can relate to a one-armed artist painting a hundred feet above the ground, but we *can* relate to Orozco's very human struggle to become who he needed to be—that achievement we can all relate to and admire.

Laurie Coyle and Rick Tejada-Flores



Photo courtesy Alfredo Orozco Valladares and Alicia González Bonnín
Self-caricature, courtesy Fundación José Clemente Oroco
Self-portrait, courtesy Mary-Anne Martin Fine Arts



OROZCO: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

The life of the Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) was a life filled with drama, adversity, and triumph. It is also one of the great stories of our modern era, a story shaped by conflicts, both external and internal; by social and political boundaries; and by issues of artistic and political engagement. Despite poverty, childhood rheumatic fever that damaged his heart, and an explosion in his youth that cost him his left hand, Orozco persisted in his wish to become an artist. He experienced the carnage and duplicity of the Mexican Revolution, the hardship following the New York stock market crash in 1929, and rising fascism in Europe during his only trip there in 1932, emerging with an aesthetic and moral vision unparalleled in twentieth century painting. Orozco and his colleagues, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, captured the imagination of Depression era America and inspired President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to put artists to work on public walls during the 1930s.

A taciturn individualist, highly sensitive and utterly inept at self-promotion, Orozco had a sharp tongue and mordant sense of humor. Described by a contemporary as “the only tragic poet America has produced,” Orozco was first and foremost a public artist whose greatest achievements were the murals he created not for individual patrons, but for the whole of society. Yet, in comparison with his colleague and rival Diego Rivera, until recently the name of this pre-eminent public artist was little known to the public. Orozco’s work was marginalized as complex and controversial, while Orozco the man has been considered as something of an enigma. Who was this solitary figure who spent years alone on scaffolds creating works that challenge both social norms and the art establishment?

Born in Zapotlan el Grande to a middle-class family that fell on hard times, Orozco was shaped at the outset of his career by the experience of ten years of civil war that gripped Mexico from 1910-1920. Some measure of the brutality he witnessed during those years is conveyed in his autobiography:

People grew used to killing, to the most pitiless egotism, to the glutting of the sensibilities, to naked bestiality. ... In the world of politics it was the same, war without quarter, struggle for power and wealth. ... Underneath it all, subterranean intrigues went on among the friends of today and the enemies of tomorrow, resolved, when the time came, upon mutual extermination.

Haunted by the cruelty and treachery of this period, Orozco’s idealism took a resolutely critical stance. He saw concepts of race and nationality and dogmas of political and religious salvation as idols that corrupt understanding and prevent the emancipation of the human spirit. Only by throwing off the shackles of creeds and prejudices that have enslaved humankind to authoritarian purposes, he believed, can genuine harmony of individual expression and social purpose come into being.

Orozco spent a total of ten years in the United States, beginning with his unsuccessful first trip in 1917, when a number of his watercolors were destroyed at the U.S. border for being “immoral.” In the end, Orozco created four major murals here (at Pomona College, the New School for Social Research, Dartmouth College, and the Museum of Modern Art), along with hundreds of easel paintings and graphic works that challenged U.S. stereotypes of Mexican art. Despite other episodes of censorship, and periods of financial deprivation, Orozco became a pioneer of the public arts movement of the 1930s and 40s. Isamu Noguchi, Ben Shahn, Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston, and Jacob Lawrence were among the American artists influenced by his expressionist style.

Orozco’s achievements in the United States gave him the stature that generated commissions after he returned to Mexico in 1934. Over the next decade, he created major frescoes in Mexico’s greatest public buildings, including the magnificent cycle with which he covered the interior walls of the Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara. The immense

nave, encompassing a series of arched panels and semi-circular ceiling vaults, provided a dramatic space for Orozco to explore the interplay of indigenous and European forces within modern-day Mexico. At the center of the nave, sixty meters above the floor, his majestic *Man of Fire* ascends into the cupola of what has become known as the “Sistine Chapel of the Americas.” It is the supreme manifestation of Orozco’s belief that “art is knowledge at the service of emotion.”

In his final years, Orozco continued to climb the scaffolding, although his damaged heart forced him to stop and catch his breath every few steps. He completed his last fresco less than a month before he died in his sleep of heart failure at the age of 65. In the 1960s and 70s, Orozco’s work helped inspire a new generation of Chicano and African American muralists to reinvent public art within their communities. His legacy continues today among contemporary artists on both sides of the border, while his travels between Mexico and the U.S. evoke the larger Mexican migrant-immigrant experience and make for a provocative parallel with our own time.

A key to understanding Orozco’s work is an awareness of the relation between the artist’s passionate idealism and his pessimism. Spain’s greatest filmmaker, the late Luis Buñuel, declared that “man is never free, yet he fights for what he can never be, and that is tragic.” Orozco’s sense of the human condition was based on a similar conviction of tragic impasse. “To have a tragic vision in the Americas is extremely difficult,” says Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, “because we were founded as the Brave New World of happiness, the great utopia. So when a writer like Faulkner breaks through the optimism of the United States, or a painter like Orozco breaks through the promise of Mexico of the New World, it is a very striking event.” Through his art Orozco shared his trauma and his anger, which he insisted over and over, in many forms, is our trauma and should be our anger. “Painting,” Orozco believed, “assails the mind. It persuades the heart.”

Jacquelynn Baas, Ph.D.



Ceiling of Hospicio Cabañas, Guadalajara. Photo by Najib Joe Hakim

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The Artist as Witness to History

- Orozco personally witnessed the brutal events of the Mexican Revolution. How did he respond? How did his personal history shape his response?
- Orozco was an “outsider” in a number of ways —can you name some? Do you believe the artist is, by definition, an “outsider” in modern society? Why?
- What does Orozco’s art tell us about the history of the Americas? About Mexico and the United States? About war in general?
- What does Carlos Fuentes mean when he says, “To have a tragic vision in the Americas is extremely difficult, because we were founded as the Brave New World of happiness, the great utopia.” Do you agree?
- What does Orozco’s art tell us about the future, as he envisioned it over 50 years ago? Consider examples such as “The Dead.” Is his work dated, relevant, timeless?
- In what ways did Orozco’s art make people in the U.S. see their own situation differently? How can art help you to see your situation within a larger context, or from another perspective?



The Trench, Mexico City. Courtesy Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes

The Immigrant experience in the United States

- Orozco was one of almost one million immigrants who traveled to the United States at the time of the Mexican Revolution. What was his first experience as an immigrant like?
- How did Orozco's experience in the U.S. change over time? Would Orozco fare differently as a struggling Mexican artist in the U.S. in 2007? Why?
- Immigration generates powerful change in the host country. What impact did Orozco and his colleagues Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros have on the United States? What were the differences between them?

The Dead, Courtesy Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes



Metaphysical Landscape, Courtesy Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes



The Role of Art in Society

- What did Orozco believe about the role of the artist in society? How did his life experience shape his beliefs about art? Did his attitude evolve over time?
- Orozco expressed complex and contradictory feelings about spirituality and religion. Can you give examples? What might be the significance of the black rectangle that appears as a motif in many of his works?
- Orozco, Siqueiros and Rivera faced censorship at various times. What were some of the controversies about their art in the 1920s-1930s? Debate about the role and responsibility of public art continues today; what are some recent controversies?
- Is there more or less censorship of artistic expression in the U.S. now than there was in Orozco's lifetime? If more, what do you believe the reasons might be? Is the target of censorship the same, or has it shifted? What are some examples?
- Can art change the world? If so, how?
- Do you believe that you, as an individual, can make a difference in the course of history?

Suggestions for Teachers: How to use OROZCO: Man of Fire in a classroom setting

- Ask students how the film speaks to them in terms of their own life experience or that of their family.
- Have your students experienced or witnessed violence in their own lives? How have they reacted?

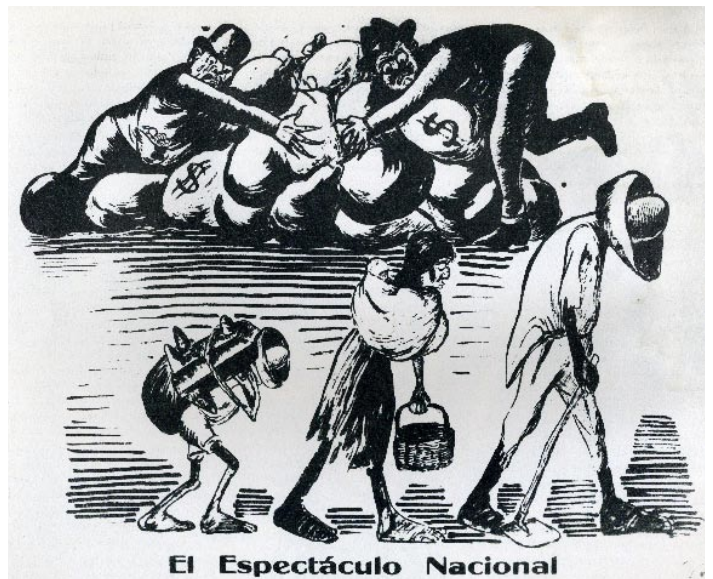


Mural *Struggle in the Orient*, The New School, New York City.
Photo by Rick Tejada-Flores

- One of Orozco's messages is that the most important power people can have is power over their own hearts and minds. You can't control events, perhaps, but you do have control over how you respond to events. How did Orozco manifest this in his own life? How might his view apply today?
- *OROZCO: Man of Fire* depicts the life story of an artist who saw his role as a public witness to violence, injustice, and hypocrisy. In what other ways might a person bear witness? Can your students think of other examples of people who challenged injustice by being willing to take a public stand?

Activities for the Classroom and Beyond

- Field trip to local murals: learn about the circumstances of their creation: painted when, why, by whom?
- Make a painting or drawing about a painful experience in your life, or the life of your family or community.
- Cut a political cartoon out of the newspaper and bring it to class to discuss how it interprets events and how visual commentary differs from written commentary.
- Find other examples of bearing witness in our contemporary world and share them with the class: photos, poems, interviews etc. How are they alike or different from Orozco's art?



Caricature, *The National Spectacle*, courtesy Fundacion José Clemente Oroco

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY AND ACTION

To Start

www.pbs.org/americanmasters/orozco_j.html Website of the PBS series American Masters /WNET, the public television broadcaster of *OROZCO: Man of Fire*.

www.paradigmproductions.org Official website of *OROZCO: Man of Fire* provides ordering information about the film, a downloadable PDF version of this viewers guide, and other educational resources.

Orozco and his art

<http://42.bobschalkwijkphotography.com/browse/#> Photographer Bob Schalkwijk has the world's most comprehensive photo archive of Mexican murals, including Orozco's murals in Mexico.

<http://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/collections/overview/americas/mesoamerica/murals/index.html> Website of the Hood Museum at Dartmouth College provides information about Orozco's murals at Dartmouth and a downloadable brochure and guide to the murals.

<http://www.getty.edu/artsednet/resources/Murals> The Getty Research Center Arts has on-line information about Orozco's art and other Mexican murals.

<http://www.cs.dartmouth.edu/~farid/orozco/> A computer model offering a 3-D virtual tour of Orozco's murals at Dartmouth College, the New School, and Pomona College.

<http://www.pomona.edu/museum/collections/prometheus> The Pomona College website source for information about *Prometheus*, Orozco's first mural in the United States.

Mural Painting in the Americas and Chicano/Latino Art

<http://www.wpamurals.com/research.htm> A good "clearinghouse" site of links to information about New Deal Murals.

<http://members.aol.com/FVOC/> An archive of art reviews by Francis V. O'Connor Ph.D., including information about the 1930s WPA Federal Art Project.

http://cemaweb.library.ucsb.edu/cema_index.html UC Santa Barbara's California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives maintains an on-line digital archive and guide to Chicano Art.

Mural Painting and Arts Education

<http://www.cpag.net> The Chicago Public Art Group creates public artwork, trains artists in mural painting, and teaches children creative skills. Download their comprehensive guide to the mural-making process at <http://www.cpag.net/guide/index.htm>.

<http://www.sparcmurals.org> The Social and Public Art Resource Center is a Los Angeles community arts organization that creates public art projects, maintains a digital mural lab and archives and provides educational programs.

<http://www.precitaeyes.org> Precita Eyes Mural Arts Center is a San Francisco community arts organization that creates mural projects and offers mural painting and art classes to children, youth and adults.

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org> The Kennedy Center provides educational materials that meet the National Standards For Arts Education, including the lesson plan, Five Artists of the Mexican Revolution.

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