Mexico, Italy: an Idea of Muralism



by Alberto Goglio

Even today, when discussing urban wall art, a large portion of Italians use a Spanish term that is technically plural but is used as if it were singular: *murales*. This is an echo, passed down to us, of the 20th-century epic of Mexican muralism, and in particular of its three founding fathers: Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. One wonders whether this echo has taken on, specifically in Italy, different nuances and meanings compared to what occurred elsewhere – and, if so, why this might have happened.

One possible reason could be ideological in nature. Despite its contradictory heterogeneity, the background from which Mexican muralism emerged is politically akin to the cultural climate of post-World War II Italy. This was a historical period marked by a rush to turn the page on the art of the twenty-year Fascist era, which had produced, in Sironi's "Grande Decorazione" on the one hand and Futurist mural art on the other, two of the most interesting expressions of modern decoration in Europe.

A second reason might be, so to speak, genetic in nature. During their youthful travels across the Old Continent, Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros looked not so much to the avant-garde movements of the first half of the 20th century as to the great pictorial cycles of the Italian tradition, from Giotto to Pinturicchio. This was both because they felt the need to engage with those who had historically preceded them in devising highly complex allegorical cycles, and because it was precisely the illustrious tradition of fresco painting to which the three artists (but especially Rivera and Orozco)

intended to programmatically refer [1]. This should come as no surprise. The pedagogical aims of Mexican muralism, in fact, stem from a premise similar to that of the Italian mural painting tradition: in both cases, the goal is to tell, through images, stories that would otherwise be incomprehensible to a largely illiterate population.



José Clemente Orozco, El hombre creador y rebelde, 1937, fresco, Guadalajara, Main Auditorium of the University Arts Museum (Wikimedia).

From an ideological – if not practical – perspective, this approach stands in solidarity with the poor and the dispossessed. The fundamental analogy between the Mexican experience and the forms of public art, conceived and created "from the bottom up", that characterized the history of Italian muralism in the 1960s and 1970s (first and foremost the murals of Orgosolo in Sardinia) stems precisely from this. However, this analogy is not without ambiguity, starting with the contradictory relationship that the three great Mexican muralists had with their patrons and those in power, whether it was the Mexican government of the day or U.S. industrial magnates.

A key point for reflection – one that has proved decisive for nearly all contemporary mural painting – is the fact that the three fathers of Mexican muralism are, albeit to varying degrees, essentially indifferent to

architecture. None of the three seems interested, except in a very marginal way, in creating a dialogue between architectural space and the pictorial composition that yields compositionally appreciable results. This has never historically occurred in such a blatant and explicit manner. Architectural space is, in effect, nullified. In several of their pictorial cycles, both Siqueiros and Rivera round off every corner or edge of the wall surface, and even when this does not occur, as in the mural for the Mexican Electricians' Union in Mexico City, created by Siqueiros in 1939, the *horror vacui* from which the painting's expressive power derives reigns unchallenged. Rather than through a dialogue with architecture, for Siqueiros, the relationship with modernity is realized through experimentation with new materials, such as acrylics, and new working methods, such as the projector and the airbrush. The creation of the wall drawing with the aid of a projector is a technical process that, in and of itself, tends to erase the geometric boundaries between one wall and another.



David Alfaro Siqueiros and Josep Renau, Retrato de la Burguesía (detail, view from bottom to top), 1939–40, pyroxylin on a concrete background applied with airbrush and brushes, Mexico City, Headquarters of the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate.

It should also be noted that a large portion of the murals created by Rivera,

Orozco, and Siqueiros were commissioned for existing buildings, some of which even dated back to the colonial era. For this reason as well, it would be entirely inappropriate to speak of an organic relationship between architectural and pictorial design [2]. Rivera's indifference toward modern architecture, coupled with a preference for decorative interventions in historic buildings, is well known. Siqueiros himself criticized this choice on more than one occasion. The task of keeping abreast of the latest developments on the international art scene would fall to the next generation, with artists such as Manuel Felgueréz, whose abstract, textural murals, skillfully composed, find a true resonance in the architectural forms designed to house them.

Compared to Rivera and Orozco, Siqueiros maintains a more open attitude toward the relationship between painting and architecture, which makes him seem more in line with what is happening in Europe: "The separation of sculpture, painting, stained glass, and so on, from architecture was the natural consequence of the individualistic conceptions characteristic of post-Renaissance society, liberal society. […] Today's world, the beginning and promise of tomorrow's, is already a multifaceted world, perfectly suited, alongside many other forms of expression, to the manifestations of plastic-figurative totality". [3]. To achieve this totality, Siqueiros believed it was necessary to engage with contemporary buildings: "And yet today, we continue to decorate colonial-style buildings with our murals, while thousands of modern buildings are being erected whose creators, architects or engineers, have not even considered the possibility of a plastic-figurative coordination between their respective fields of expertise" [4].

The affinity between Siqueiros's words and the dialectic between painting and architecture that characterized European figurative culture in the first half of the twentieth century would seem to be very close. In reality, when he speaks of plastic-figurative coordination, Siqueiros is not referring to a collaboration between architect and artist aimed at achieving a compositional synthesis, since he denies that architecture possesses an aesthetic dimension that goes beyond the functional planning of space and the city: "And there can be no doubt about it. In the future, architecture will be created on an urban scale (architecture understood as an autonomous building will cease to exist)" [5]. According to Siqueiros, the collaboration between architect and artist must be rethought (in accordance with an ideological framework he considers indispensable) by subordinating spatial organization entirely to the communicative effectiveness of the medium of painting. When viewed in relation to a pictorial conception such as that of contemporary muralism – which asserts, in a more or less polemical manner, its independence from architecture in redesigning the urban context, which is itself highly "built up" but not very "architectural" – Siqueiros's thinking takes on a foundational significance.



David Alfaro Siqueiros, El pueblo a la universidad, la universidad al pueblo (1952–1956), concrete and glass mosaic, Mexico City, National Autonomous University of Mexico (Wikimedia).

Another clear contribution, both to today's urban art and to contemporary art in general, is the ease with which Siqueiros employs techniques and materials associated with industrial culture. As we have already seen, he does not believe that a truly modern mural can be created using traditional methods, partly because, as a staunch materialist, he holds that the techniques and products used, far from being mere means of giving form to an ideal, play a decisive role in the genesis of the work of art: "In every artistic expression, and especially in the figurative arts, which are material arts, hyperforms or styles, and ultimately the aesthetics that derive from them, are a consequence of the integral function and the technique associated with it. It should not be forgotten that materials and tools in the arts have a generative function, a decisive value, both from a formal and an aesthetic standpoint" [6]. The conclusion is clear: to create authentically modern art, one must abandon traditional techniques in favor of the new materials that modernity makes available.

A little further on, Siqueiros offers some reflections on the possible developments of technology as applied to mural painting. His words have an almost prophetic quality: "But such a comprehensive plastic-figurative approach can only be the result of a new technology – indeed, a new

technology all its own, scientific and mechanical – whereas that of the past was empirical and artisanal: it will be the refinement of the technology that has already been adopted for modern architectural structures and, more generally, for construction, but which has not yet been understood by nearly all painters, sculptors, designers, and so on. This will be a new technology that will complement concrete, steel, glass, and plastics – those created by modern organic chemistry – which are suitable for use in mural painting, monumental polychrome sculpture, the polychrome decoration of buildings, and so on; among these, it suffices to mention celluloid, synthetic rubber, Bakelite, vinyl, various silicones, different pyroxelines, fluorescent painting materials, various forms of artificial lighting, and material surfaces made receptive to paint through electric currents – just as we now have paper sensitive to color photography – as well as dozens of new materials that will be provided to us by the science of the future” [7].



David Alfaro Siqueiros, La Marcha de la Humanidad (detail), 1964–71, fiber-cement panel and acrylic paint, Mexico City, Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros (Wikimedia/Alejandro Linares Garcia).

So far, nothing that the Futurists hadn’t already said decades earlier. Except that the connection between Siqueiros and the young generation of artists who, in the 1950s and precisely on this basis, would shift the center of gravity of art from Europe to the United States is a historically

established fact [8]. Let's be clear: beyond his polemic against the painting of his time, a critique directed as much at European pictorial formalism, guilty of being a culturally elitist expression of bourgeois society, as at the painting of Rivera and his Mexican followers, whose work often dilutes its communicative power into a sort of folkloric mannerism, in reality, Siqueiros is far more tied to tradition than he is willing to admit. In his work, there is no trace of a possible abandonment of the medium of painting in favor of modern techniques better suited to conveying narratives and meanings [9]. When reread more than seventy years later – even though written by an artist who made no compromises regarding the importance and centrality of the medium of painting – Siqueiros's words foreshadow what has occurred both in contemporary art and in the genesis of the decorative veneer of certain contemporary architecture.

In our view, it is precisely the inconsistencies between Siqueiros's theoretical assumptions and his practical work that serve as a metaphor for the arduous struggle of traditional pictorial decoration, which faces two challenges. On the one hand, the irreversible changes in how a work of art is experienced within a space force it to "raise its voice" to drown out the background noise that characterizes modern life [10]. On the other hand, new communication and information technologies are coming to the fore, serving a system that relegates the observer to the role of a passive consumer of advertising messages. Mural painting is still called upon today to grapple with these very contradictions. The excess and, not infrequently, the heaviness that characterize certain contemporary muralism seem to descend directly, as if from a family tree, from the pictorial cycles created by the three leading exponents of Mexican muralism.

[1] Unlike Rivera and Orozco, Siqueiros was an outspoken advocate of experimenting with innovative technologies and materials in painting, seeing this as the only possible connection to the new materials used in modern architecture. This open-minded attitude led him, among other things, to introduce synthetic pigments, which until then had been used only for industrial purposes, into the practice of mural painting. This sparked intense controversy between Siqueiros and other muralists, who advocated a return to traditional techniques such as encaustic and fresco. In this regard, Orozco, in an article published in 1947, ironically remarked: "Painting with Duco is like having a banquet out of tins" (quoted in A. Rodriguez, *A History of Mexican Mural Painting* , Putnam, New York 1969, p. 353).

[2] Yet Mexico has no shortage of great modern architects with whom to engage in dialogue - or, perhaps, a clash - such as Luis Barragán, or architectural theorists like José Villagrán García. Curiously, one of the

best-known Mexican buildings of the 20th century is none other than Diego Rivera's home and studio, designed in a rationalist style by the architect-painter Juan O'Gorman, a student of Villagrán. Even in this case, however, Rivera was not interested in a dialectical relationship with the forms of modern architecture. It would be O'Gorman himself, in the 1950s, who achieved a synthesis between muralism and architecture in the library of the University of Mexico City, before definitively abandoning the field of architecture in favor of painting, moving toward a style very close to Rivera's muralism.

[3-7] The quotes are taken from D.A. Siqueiros, *Como se pinta un mural*, Ediciones Taller Siqueiros, Cuernavaca 1951, pp. 12-14. According to the author's intent, this is a book that pragmatically addresses all the stages of creating a mural, beginning with the initial survey of the space in which to work and the choice of technique, through to the final documentation of the completed work: a stage that, for Siqueiros, was almost as important as the creation of the mural itself. In reality, the text is rich in broader theoretical reflections. Indeed, it can be considered a summary and reorganization of the positions and reflections the author expressed over the course of thirty years in articles, manifestos, interviews, and lectures (from this point on, all Spanish-English translations are editorial.).

[8] Siqueiros stayed in the United States several times during the 1930s. In 1935–36, he founded and directed the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop in New York, a studio dedicated to experimenting with new techniques and industrial materials in painting, in which young American artists - including Jackson Pollock - participated. The presence of Mexican muralists in the U.S., despite their complete ideological incompatibility, can be explained by the need to train a generation of artists in mural painting following the establishment of the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), the ambitious government program to support American art launched during the Great Depression.

[9] On the one hand, Siqueiros realizes that mural painting is called upon to respond to these changes - more than any other artistic expression - because of its social and educational function; on the other hand, he recognizes the enormous narrative potential of moving images. But, like every technical medium of modernity, cinema too must be traced back to - or, we might say, anchored in - the centrality of the act of painting. In this regard, Siqueiros states: "Could we not establish a relationship between mural painting proper - historically determined - and cinematography? Could we not create an aesthetic phenomenon in which, ultimately, the work of art is, in and of itself, oriented toward color cinematography? It has always struck me as somewhat inexplicable that

modern painters have not sought connections between abstract polychromatic forms while bearing in mind the experience of animated cartoons. Now, however, we can finally understand the reason for this shortcoming, which lies in their technical backwardness, in their stubborn archaism masked by so-called modernism. […] Can the discerning reader imagine what a cinematic reproduction - worthy of the name and in color - of a mural might look like, one that embodies an active spatial vision as well as genuine thematic depth? And what would the great masters of the Renaissance say if they could see that murals - which are, by their very nature, public yet fixed and rooted - can in this way detach themselves from the buildings where they were created, reaching every country and the entire population of those countries, thereby replicating, on a far grander scale, the visual impact once reserved solely for the direct viewers of those very works? Painting in general and cinematography therefore have before them a future of union and convergence that I can only describe as marvelous.” D.A. Siqueiros, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-22.

10 The reference is to Mario Sironi, who - against the backdrop of the controversy surrounding easel painting - saw mural painting as the natural outlet for confronting "an era of grandiose myths and gigantic upheavals". The sweeping pictorial gesture that characterizes the mural painting project thus becomes, for the Italian artist - beyond the rhetoric tied to the myth of reviving the Italian artistic tradition - the most coherent way to respond to the challenges that an encroaching modernity poses to the production of images. In this sense, the painting would be a "form now too limited and insufficient for contemporary syntheses, […] a monotonous and overly simple harmony for the complex orchestrations of modern life, or too weak and incapable of capturing people’s attention" (M. Sironi, *Pittura murale*, "Il popolo d’Italia", January 1, 1932). Twenty years after Sironi’s reflections, Siqueiros realized that, given the dynamism of modern life and the need to spread the political message underlying his artistic work, large-scale painting - if executed in a traditional manner - was just as inadequate as a painting on an easel. As we have seen, for Siqueiros, harmony with modernity is achieved through the use of innovative materials, combined with a design aimed at amplifying the pictorial dynamism of the surfaces, and, finally, photographic and cinematic documentation to facilitate the dissemination of the work. The medium of film is thus relegated to a mere supporting role, outside the actual act of expression. In this sense, the accusation that Siqueiros levels against European artists - who, he claims, suffer from "stubborn archeologism masked as self-styled modernism" (see previous note) - could be directed first and foremost against his own work.

Homepage: Diego Rivera, Historia de Morelos, Conquista y Revolución (detail of an arch featuring an image of Emiliano Zapata), 1929–30,

fresco, Cuernavaca, Palacio de Cortés (Wikimedia/Aluisbarron).
Below: Juan O'Gorman, Representación Histórica de la Cultura, 1950–56, perimeter mural in glass mosaic, Mexico City, Central Library of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Wikimedia).

