THE RISE OF A MIDDLE-CLASS TRADITION IN MEXICAN ART

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If the happenings in twentieth-century Mexican art could be translated into musical notation, the score would resemble a movement of a symphony with two major themes. The original theme, that of a Revolutionary art for the masses, was stated loudly and boldly at the opening of the movement. Slowly a counter-theme, that of a conservative art for the middle-class, began to emerge. The strains of the second theme have been especially perceptible since 1940; the two melodies have woven together in a counterpoint pattern for twenty years. Gradually, the conservative theme is becoming predominant over the ever-weakening notes of the radical one.

The Revolutionary Tradition in Mexican Art

The rise of a middle-class art in twentieth-century Mexico can best be understood when seen against the background of Revolutionary art out of which it is emerging. An art for the masses, with appropriate style, content, and purpose, has dominated the art scene since 1910, as a parallel movement accompanying the politico-social Revolution. During the initial military period painters joined together in collective endeavors to create a popular art, and were paid by the government to do so. Through the Ministry of Education, the government followed the policy of using the pictorial arts, especially mural paintings,1 as a means of educating the populace to the official philosophy of the Revolution, and as a means of instilling in the people a renewed respect for their own native Indian artistic traditions.

Thematically, art paralleled government, and a similarity was evident between national issues illustrated by painters and those emphasized by governments. The messages conveyed by the art of the early years were as militantly socialistic as were the Revolutionary reforms. Themes stressed by both political and artistic sermons were anti-foreignism, anti-clericalism, anti-capitalism, anti-fascism, anti-militarism, redistribu-

1 Second only to murals, the graphic arts were popular as a medium for propagandizing and educating the masses through newspapers, magazines, and posters.
tion of land and wealth, labor reforms, education, and "indianism." The point of view was "nationalistic and socialistic, tinged with a vague Marxism, and very sentimental, stressing values characteristic of Mexico in lieu of imported values. This new outlook (in art) appealed to governments and intellectual groups, (who were) trying to create an atmosphere conducive to the imminent social and political transformations."²

The dedicated group of artists, which aggressively put into action a profound social ideology, was an unique historical phenomenon. Artists have organized themselves, mutually to improve their effectiveness, at other times and places: for example, the Staatliches Bauhaus, an association of artists at Weimar, Germany, from 1919 to 1933, which included Walter Gropius, Paul Klee, Lyonel Feininger, and Wassily Kandinsky.³ Likewise, artists have been hired by the state to illustrate the virtues and principles of the government and to educate the people thereto; for example, the Venetian painters of the Renaissance, who were commissioned to paint the glorious pageants and ceremonies of the State of Venice.⁴ In the modern Mexican movement, besides the factors of organization and government patronage, the additional ingredient of ideological commitment has resulted in a thorough-going socialistic art.⁵ The artists committed themselves to the practice of a Marxian philosophy which was articulated by David Alfaro Siqueiros in a Manifesto which he published in 1921:⁶

Social, Political, and Aesthetic Declaration from the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors to the indigenous races humiliated through centuries; to the soldiers converted into hangmen by their chiefs; to the workers and peasants who are oppressed by the rich; and to the intellectuals who are not servile to the bourgeoisie:

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³Maurice Raynal, Modern Painting, Editions d'Art Albert Skira (Switzerland, 1956), p. 231-32. The aim of the Bauhaus was "to create an association of architects, sculptors, and painters, enabling them to pool their ideas, experiment with new techniques, and in collaboration to produce work on thoroughly modern lines." The conclusion of their Manifesto stated: "Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen, free from that class-dividing arrogance which sets up an impassable barrier between the artist and the artisan. Let us all join in ... that new structure of the future in which architecture, sculpture, and painting are harmoniously reunited. Millions of workers will help ... [to create the] image of their faith in a new age."
⁵The art picture presently existing in Russia fits this description. However, the difference lies in the fact that Russian artists are not allowed such freedom, of honest individual expression, as Mexican ones have enjoyed from the outset. Sincerely committed to socialism, the Mexican artists adhered to official "party-line" by internal not external motivation.
We are with those who seek the overthrow of an old and inhuman system within which you, worker of the soil, produce riches for the overseer and politician, while you starve. Within which you, worker in the city, move the wheels of industries, weave the cloth, and create with your hands the modern comforts enjoyed by the parasites and prostitutes, while your own body is numb with cold. Within which you, Indian soldier, heroically abandon your land and give your life in the eternal hope of liberating your race from the degradation and misery of centuries.

Not only the noble labor but even the smallest manifestations of the material and spiritual vitality of our race spring from our native midst. Its admirable, exceptional, and peculiar ability to express beauty — the art of the Mexican people — is the highest and greatest spiritual expression of the world-tradition which constitutes our most valued heritage. It is great because it surges from the people; it is collective, and our own aesthetic aim is to socialize artistic expression, to destroy bourgeois individualism.

We repudiate so-called easel art and all such art which springs from ultra-intellectual circles, for it is essentially aristocratic.

We hail the monumental expression of art because such art is public property.

We proclaim that this being the moment of social transition from a decrepit to a new order, the makers of beauty must invest their greatest efforts in the aim of materializing an art valuable to the people; and our supreme objective in art, which is today an expression for individual pleasure, is to create beauty for all, beauty that enlightens and stirs to struggle.

Beginnings of Conservatism in the Socio-Political Milieu

Out of this foundation of radical policies, both in politics and in art, a more conservative trend has developed. During the four periods in twentieth-century Mexico’s politico-social changes, the governments have successively favored four segments of society as having first claim on available national resources: the military (1910-1924), the urban workers (1924-1934), the rural peasants (1934-1940), and the industrial-commercial middle-classes (1940-1960). There have been indications of the roots of the present-day conservative countermovement ever since the inception of the Revolution itself. The Plutarco Elías Calles regime, 1924 to 1934, was the first to turn reactionary, by beginning to favor the incipient middle-class. Lázaro Cárdenas, 1934 to 1940, maintained a satisfactorily peaceful coexistence with the Church and quieted most anti-clerical sentiments. The rehabilitation of the Church was possible because political power was now strong enough to allay fears of the Vatican as an external threat to the nation. The Cárdenas administration featured the expropriation of foreign oil investments, allowing growing middle-class money to operate domestically the nation’s own national resources. Industrialization, and its companion urbanization,
began slowly in the early years of the century, becoming noticeable during the Cárdenas period. Expansions in industry created increasing demands for the skills of the growing urban middle-class. Throughout the past fifty years the Revolution's emphasis on nativism, a program called Indianismo, declined in inverse proportion to the rise of a middle-class.

Since 1940, the middle-class has increased in size and influence to such an extent that it has been able to gain control of the government. The radical social reforms of the initial Revolution have been replaced by a moderate capitalism. The four presidents of this period, Ávila Camacho, Miguel Alemán, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, and Adolfo López Mateos, generally have favored the commercial-industrial middle-classes rather than the lower-classes of laborers and farmers. Economic stability and growth, based on wise use of natural resources domestically controlled, has been closely related to the rise of the middle-class.

Growth of Conservative Elements in Art, 1910-1940

1910-1924

The socio-political trends of the past fifty years have been echoed in the art world, each of the four periods becoming more conservative. During the early years, 1910 to 1924, the artists generally adhered to the nationalistic subject-matter. Only the pro-Church paintings contradicted the Revolutionary "party-line." Subversive use of Christian ideas occurred occasionally in paintings by nominal anti-clericals.

In the National Preparatory School, Diego Rivera painted a mural illustrating his own conception of the Creation. Included were symbolic figures of the cardinal virtues of Justice, Prudence, Fortitude, and Temperance, and the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity. He himself, an articulate Church-hater, confessed, "This is nothing more than a big exvoto." Elsewhere in the Preparatory School, José Clemente Orozco painted two Christian themes, "Maternity," a version of the classical madonna and child, and "Christ Destroying His Own Cross." Other painters touched on Christian concepts when they illustrated folk fiestas, which usually celebrate a Church holiday. Fernando Leal painted the "Black Christ of Chalma," which featured a crucifixion scene. Fermín Revueltas painted the "Fiesta of the Virgin of Guada-
lupe,” the epitome of all national annual festivals, revealing the native Mexican version of Christianity.

All of these pictures were murals, in accordance with the nationalistic policy of public painting, in spite of their more or less non-nationalistic content. However, during the early 1920’s there was a small amount of easel painting, which was officially considered non-Revolutionary and decadent, done by Francisco Goitia, Carlos Mérida, Carlos Orozco Romero, and Manuel Rodrígues Lozano.

1924-1934

Following the years of military control, the period 1924 to 1934 contained the blossoming of the urban labor segment and the suppression of painting. The artists had expected to find a true spokesman in the labor-minded Calles, for they, too, were great advocates of organized labor and considered themselves part of it. Calles, however, proved a disappointment to the radical artists, because he and his puppet-presidents extended little patronage to art; in fact, his regime later turned reactionary, favoring the upper- and middle-classes. Because of the absence of government commissions, artists were forced to look elsewhere for employment, and found support from some private sources, both commercial and individual. Two important mural commissions in private business houses went to Orozco and Revueltas. The former was hired in 1925 by Francisco Sergio Iturbe, proprietor of Sanborn’s House of Tiles, to paint his mural “Omniscience” on the interior of the restaurant. Revueltas decorated the new National Mortgage and Urban Bank in 1933.

Orozco, Jean Charlot, and many other muralists sought private patronage by turning to easel painting. For example, Orozco painted his famous series of penetrating and perceptive easel works called “Mexico in Revolution.” Easel painting would not have been possible had there not been a market for it; thus, this evidence implies the existence of a growing class of people with money and taste for privately-owned paintings.

Thematically, the only frequent way in which artists spoke out against the Revolution, as in the earlier militant years, was to express sympathy for the Christian faith. Federico Cantú relied upon Christian themes for the majority of his works. Even Rivera found something praiseworthy in Mexican Christianity when he included, in the

10 Some even left the country, or took state government commissions, or even did non-artistic work.
Cortés Palace mural, a laudatory portrayal of the religious and educational task of the Franciscan and Dominican fathers. Also, he actually criticized the government policy of anti-clericalism with a sympathetic portrait of a cristero, one of the pious Catholic peasants who revolted, in 1926 to 1929, against Calles' vigorous enforcement of the anti-clerical clauses of the Constitution.

Orozco, true to his independent attitude toward the Revolution, felt free to express himself in Christian terms whenever he chose. It may be significant that when he repeated his earlier theme of “Christ Destroying His Own Cross,” he did it outside of Mexico, at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. Perhaps he recalled the damage done to his first one at the National Preparatory School; or perhaps, given the anti-clericalism of Calles, he hesitated to use a Christian theme inside the country. The painting was meant as a condemnation of the total human civilization, including, of course, a Revolutionary Mexico, which Christ no longer deemed worthy of his sacrifice.

Rufino Tamayo painted a non-Revolutionary, yet also non-Christian, series of murals for the Conservatory of Music in Mexico City on the universal subject of music. That the conservatory was vital enough to be redecorating indicates a growth in the class of people which patronized it, the formal study of music being pursued by the upper- and middle-classes of society, not the masses. Tamayo employed a pre-Columbian style to portray figures representing “Music,” a nude “Intuition,” a clothed “Intelligence,” “Humanity,” and “Song.”

1934-1940

The presidential administration of Lázaro Cárdenas, 1934 to 1940, marked the rebirth of the agrarian Revolution and of the artistic renaissance. The aesthetic leaders were encouraged once more by public sponsorship of art. In opposition to the radical Revolutionary policy of nationalistic isolation, Cárdenas encouraged art commissioned by foreign patrons, for the purpose of promoting international good will by capitalizing on the artists' world-wide fame.

Reflecting the growing conservatism of the government, painters began to feel less restricted to Revolutionary themes. Art-for-art's-sake, instead of art-for-propaganda, had become an accepted philosophy. The illiterate masses were declining in official importance; thus, less attention was given to educating them through pictures. On the other hand, the intelligent bourgeoisie was increasing in official importance; thus, more art was produced to meet their demands.

The modern Mexican art movement was old enough by the Cárdenas
period to have allowed factions to develop within the group of artists. Many of the younger painters had separated from the original ideology that art must be public and serve a political and social purpose. There were two definite camps: the Revolutionary artists, headed by Rivera and Siqueiros, and the non-Revolutionary artists, led by Tamayo and Mérida. Orozco transcended the two divisions, belonging to both and to neither.

There were many painters who preferred non-nationalistic themes and styles: e.g., Roberto Montenegro used a style called lyricism and poetry. Mérida was an abstractionist, Jesús Guerrero Galván showed more French influences than Mexican, Orozco Romero did surrealist experiments of sub-consciouss psychological studies, Augustín Lazo used poetic mysticism, and Tamayo painted pictures too rigorously pure and ascetically austere to communicate to the masses at all. There was thematic dissention within the original camp of nationalistic painters: e.g., Rivera praised science and technology as man’s hope for salvation, while Orozco condemned those very elements of modern civilization because they destroyed man’s spirit.

The non-Revolutionaries were often also non-muralists, rebelling against media, as well as thematic content and style. This was a “middle-class” symptom, for easel works could be privately owned, whereas murals were public property.

By 1936, the non-Revolutionary artists had organized themselves into the National Association of Artists, comparable to the earlier organizations of the Revolutionary artists. They chose Tamayo as their delegate to a meeting in New York of a Congress of Artists.

Some examples of paintings done in the Cárdenas period, which can be considered non-Revolutionary in content, will illustrate the conservative trend. Cantú continued painting themes from the Christian tradition, such as “Descent from the Cross,” and “The Last Supper.” Other painters also began to turn to religious subjects, reflecting the increasing favor being shown the Church under that administration.

In the spirit of middle-class values, Orozco criticized the Revolution, in spite of the benefits it brought to the masses, in his murals at the Cabañas Orphanage in Guadalajara. He condemned the Revolution’s pre-occupation with technology and industry, which had forced itself

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12 Ibid., p. 72.
13 Ibid., p. 191.
14 Virginia Stewart, 45 Contemporary Mexican Artists, (Stanford, Calif., 1951)
like a military machine upon the Mexican people. This theme was reiterated on the side walls of the Jilquiplan library and in “Catharsis” at the Palace of Fine Arts, where he declared that human salvation depends on rebellion against the mechanized world.

Also at the Cabañas Orphanage, Orozco preached the elevation of the spiritual qualities of man and the overcoming of the political and material aspects as his only hope for salvation. This work represented a radical departure from the official Revolutionary emphasis on particular native culture, for it spoke in the name of universal humanity. In the dome of the orphanage chapel, Man was presented as the four elements, representing his many-sided nature. Three of mankind’s components were on the ground frantically struggling for mastery, while the spiritual Man soared upward, rising above his material environment.

The one outstanding privately-commissioned mural of the period was painted by Rivera at the Hotel Reforma in 1935. It, however, was quite radical in content, using political and nativistic folk themes.

The zealous themes of anti-clericalism and anti-foreignism had sharply declined since the outset of the Revolutionary art movement. In maintaining a satisfactorily calm relationship with the Church and subduing anti-clerical sentiments, Cárdenas made possible some growth in religious art. The expropriation of foreign oil investments, due to middle-class influence, may explain the dearth of anti-foreign demands in artistic themes. (Part of the credit for the expropriation act has been given to Rivera and Siqueiros for their undying efforts at anti-foreignism during the preceding fifteen years.15)

In spite of the many evidences of the rise of a middle-class during these years, socialism was the underlying ideology of the Cárdenas period. It must be admitted that many artists concurred by pictorially condemning the capitalism of the middle-class.

**Middle-Class Art, 1940-1960**

Mexico’s modern art movement has gained acceptance as an integral part of the contemporary national milieu. The artistic “renaissance” has become as well-established as the “Institutionalized Revolution” of the government. Art has accompanied politics along the road toward conservatism to the extent that most observers of the Mexican art scene agree that a relevance to changing social trends has been maintained. There has been an inter-relation between artists and society, each affecting the other.

Art has ceased to be directed primarily to the masses. The propaganda painting of earlier decades has decidedly diminished, although it is impossible to foresee whether it may reappear at some time in the future. The "golden age" of the radical leftist painters apparently has passed, while the moderate tradition has established a permanent position for itself.

There is widespread feeling today that the militantly organized Revolutionary muralists, of the earlier periods, have harmed Mexican creative art by dictating the prescribed form and content. For some time after the work of Tamayo began to appear in 1934, his recognition was delayed because the world of art was dominated by Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros, who were favored by the official authorities. However, Tamayo, Mérida, and the other dissidents have proved that individual variations are still possible in the face of a stereotyped art movement. Tamayo has refused to condescend to use art for political propaganda or social commentary, and is now displeased with himself for having compromised his principles by using nationalistic themes in his two murals in the Palacio de Bellas Artes in 1952-1953.

Unfortunately, the vitality of the initial Revolutionary painting soon disintegrated into a "torpid exploitation of native subject matter which necessarily had to lead to a picturesque art in which the exoticism of the subject was the only — and very doubtful — contribution."

"Mexican painting has lost its vigor and ought to come out of its ivory tower in order to recover its vitality," according to Tamayo in a recent statement made to the press. He expressed regret that the Mexican art scene has become disastrously static, rigidly excluding new ideas and new painters. Referring to the Revolutionary art movement, he declared that the "realistic school has few members who can carry the torch left by Rivera and Orozco, and the other of the most renowned muralists, Siqueiros, is practically inactive... All the old molds of art and science have been broken. A new era has been opened with inter-planetary space travel. And if everyone is now looking for a

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16 This statement was made by Rufino Tamayo to Dr. Carlton Sprague Smith, of New York University and the Public Library of the City of New York, in Mexico in February, 1960.
17 This sentiment was expressed by Professor Merle Wachter, Director of the Centro de Arte at Mexico City College, in an interview in August, 1957.
18 de Szyszlo, loc. cit., p. 141.
19 According to Carlton Sprague Smith, in May 1960.
20 de Szyszlo, loc. cit., p. 137.
21 Diario Las Américas, Miami, Florida, April 5, 1960.
new language, the painter cannot remain behind.” He believes that Mexican art has no other hope for survival except to abandon the criterion that the only road to follow is descriptive realism, and to allow the entrance of new currents and the appearance of new painters.

Carlton Sprague Smith, expert on Latin American humanistic studies, asserts that Revolutionary painting was effective for its particular moment in history, but it will not survive to be remembered as outstanding in the total history of art. The Mexican school of painting was a normal and natural echo of the Revolution, but it failed to grow, leaving an artistic vacuum today.

Dr. Smith believes that Mexico’s radical architecture, especially the examples at the University City, will have a more permanent position in the history of art than will the monumental murals. A glance at the list of recent and current material published in journals and periodicals seems to support this thesis. There is much world-wide attention paid to Mexican architecture today, more than to painting. Articles on the subject can be found written in French, German, Italian, English, and Spanish. Some of the most radical examples of recent designs in architecture include the Restaurant Los Manantiales at Xochimilco and the Plaza de los Abanicos at Cuernavaca. The former, designed by Joaquin Alvarez Ordóñez and Félix Candela, is a groined vault supported on eight points formed by the intersection of four reinforced concrete shells. The latter is a radically conceived bandstand in the shape of three converging concrete fans, done by Guillermo Rosell, Manuel La Rosa, and Candela. Some of the most frequent manifestations of innovations in architecture are found in apartment buildings, such as the one recently designed by Manuel Rosen in Mexico City.

Nevertheless, in spite of widespread condemnation of the original school of Revolutionary painters, it must be admitted that their painting has succeeded in affecting public opinion. Rivera’s influence, especially, has been widely felt by the nation. Recently, his influence has been undesirable to those now in power who disagree with his ideology. Because of his unwillingness to change with the times, some of his later anti-capitalist works have been opposed. It has been feared that they would create an effect which is unwanted by the growing capital-

22 Ibid.
23 This is the opinion of Dr. Smith, stated in an interview in May 1960.
25 Ibid., p. 31.
ist elements. The fact that several of his Mexican murals have been destroyed or concealed is witness both to the belief in their effectiveness and to the shift in current ideology.

Consistent with the general trend, the artists' craft unions of the Revolutionary period have disappeared, with the exception of the National Association of Artists, the younger conservative group. Apropos of the earlier socialistic policies, the painters preferred to sacrifice their individuality in order to produce collective works of art for preaching socialism for mass consumption. Similarly today, apropos of the growing capitalistic policies, the artists tend to cherish their individuality, as the businessmen and the industrialists cherish "state-directed laissez-faire."

The new groups of younger artists embrace a set of standards which correspond generally with the values of the new middle-classes. A healthier, more heterogeneous situation in the art world is developing, now that a sector of non-Revolutionary painters is emerging to challenge the old monopoly on aesthetic standards. There have been two or three successive waves of painters who entirely missed the political and aesthetic Revolutions, and who have followed their own separate paths, instead of the path dictated by the original unified group of artists. However, the younger painters, who have revolted against the Revolutionary ideology, have not escaped being greatly influenced by the three Revolutionary masters, Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. Unquestioning idolatry of the masters has been replaced by a respectful but critical veneration for their accomplishments. The primary influences of the older generation of the younger painters have been Rivera's portrayal of science and Orozco's understanding of human values. The original inner group of Revolutionary artists, and their followers, are rapidly becoming the minority, although they have continued to be the most forceful and persistent group in their pictorial presentations. Unquestionably there are still two bona fide divisions of the modern Mexican art movement, the Revolutionary Marxians headed by Siqueiros, and the non-Revolutionaries headed by Tamayo.

27 "Rivera and the Bricklayers," The Nation (New York), December 14, 1957, p. 44.
30 Siqueiros heads the remnant of the radical painters at least in spirit and inspiration, although Tamayo has stated that he is "practically inactive" as a painter. Cf., p. 11.
To measure the stature of Tamayo, the primary exponent of the growing conservative middle-class art, best reveals the acceptance of the total trend. Domestically, his recognition has been shown in many ways: e.g., the official invitation to execute two murals at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, an honor hitherto reserved to the three pioneers; and a complete issue of the government publication Artes de México devoted to Tamayo and his work in 1956. International acclaim has also been forthcoming: his works are exhibited in many major museums around the world; and there have been many special one-man exhibits of Tamayo's paintings in the United States. Knoedler Galleries in New York held a Tamayo Exhibit in November and December, 1959. The New Art Center, also in New York, included some of his work in an exhibit of the same dates. Likewise, there have been recent exhibits in Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, and elsewhere of Tamayo and other Mexicans, representing the increasing attention paid Latin American art nowadays in this country.

There has been a "change of patronage in modern Mexico . . . from a purely governmental to an increasingly private character." There are many kinds of new privately-owned commercial buildings — banks, factories, office buildings, stores, hotels, restaurants, night clubs, theatre — have included murals in their decor. The Church has employed painters, in many instances, to decorate its houses of worship. Individual patrons, in addition to their increasing requests for easel works, have commissioned artists to paint murals on walls in their private residences.

A definite trend has developed, away from dependence on the federal government as the major patron of art, toward a combination of public and private patronage. This has had a close correlation with the change in government ideology from socialism toward capitalism. Just as the Mexican government has begun to encourage a satisfactory combination of private enterprise and government control of the economy, an eclectic rather than a dogmatic policy; art has become both socialistic and capitalistic, in that it is both publicly and privately patronized.

Nevertheless, the government has continued to follow a limited policy of subsidizing mural painting. The government has continued to encourage art without preference to one school of painters or another, and without any censorship of subject matter. An impressive number of murals have been commissioned during the recent period. The walls of Mexico City have literally burst into color, as government office buildings, educational institutions, apartment developments, and other

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public buildings have received mural treatment. In addition, the government has financed numerous art exhibits and publications. The Ministry of Education has remained active in the art world through its Department of Plastic Arts, continuing the "cultural missions" in rural areas and the open-air schools of painting, and inaugurating fellowships for art instructors in government teaching jobs.

The government has officially honored two of Mexico's most outstanding modern muralists. The National Institute of Fine Arts presented retrospective exhibits of Rivera's paintings in 1941 and of Orozco's work in 1947. In 1947 President Alemán awarded Orozco the twenty-thousand-peso prize given to the nation's foremost cultural exponent in all areas of art and science for the preceding five years. A few months after his death in 1949, a memorial ceremony was conducted in homage to Orozco at the government-operated National College. At the insistence of Rivera, Orozco was the first Mexican painter to receive the high honor of being buried in the National Pantheon. In 1957, Rivera became the second, with Siqueiros delivering the chief oration at the civil funeral.

In like manner to the dualism found in ideology and in patronage, there exist today two streams of emphasis in style. There are two choices available to every painter in Mexico: he may either follow the lead of the earlier radicals by choosing the style of descriptive realism, or he may go in the direction of the newer trend toward abstract styles.

Tamayo, the pace-setter, is indebted to his native roots stylistically, in that he uses his Mexican inheritance of color and form and motif, but he refuses to use the representational cartooning employed by Rivera. He is deeply Mexican without representing Mexican themes, proof that awareness of national roots does not preclude recognition and assimilation of the findings of great painters of other countries. Painters no longer concentrate on choosing a style which will communicate to the uneducated masses, rather they direct their styles to middle-class taste and education. The original intention was to use native art forms, in the simplest manner possible, so that the illiterate masses would readily understand the message. Today the increase of education, primarily found in the growing commercial-industrial middle-classes, has created a demand for a more intellectual style of art. For example, the profound philosophical concepts symbolically illustrated by Orozco in the Cabañas Orphanage have gained preference over the straight-

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32 Stewart, op. cit., p. 18.
33 Time, LXX (December 9, 1957), p. 90.
forward cartooning of peasant life found in Rivera's murals in the Ministry of Education.

Taking Tamayo's style as the supreme example of most present-day Mexican artistic expression, and examination of his approach to painting will reveal the sophisticated nuances of meaning which the educated middle-classes are best prepared to understand. As has been said elsewhere, Tamayo is not a primitive painter but a gifted contemporary Mexican, perfectly knowledgeable in the whole of modern art, yet derives the major inspiration for his haunting semi-abstract figures from the oldest Mexican traditions. He uses Mayan and Aztec symbols not as mere decoration, but as an assertion that pre-Columbian imagery is still a vital force for Mexican artists today. This sense of nativistic authenticity is a powerful means of attraction in Tamayo's work.

Also, his skill as a colorist enhances Tamayo's power to communicate. His glowing sunset tones, his strong color contrasts, his rhythmic patterns based on coloration, create an intense drama of tropical sensualism. For example, his ubiquitous paintings of watermelons have enjoyed popularity on a world-wide scale because of their ability to provoke emotional experience through the transformation of optical reality. The red and green of his melons are like blood and jade. In his most recent paintings, as exhibited at the Knoedler Gallery in New York at the close of 1959, Tamayo displayed a new emphasis in his coloristic style. He has discarded the somber monotony of low color for a brilliance of hues, a depth and splendor of color which does not obscure the image with which it is concerned, but vitalizes it.

The psychological depth of Tamayo's style is universally acclaimed. His communication is two-directional: it evokes a response from the spectator by means of subtle and somber techniques. He fades disturbing images into an ambiance of pale tonalities, so that the full impact makes itself felt slowly.

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84 Pablo Picasso is the one non-Mexican painter most frequently pointed to as an influence on Tamayo's work. A recent review of a Tamayo exhibit compared his "White Rider on a Red Horse" with the imagery in Picasso's "Guernica." Donald Judd, "Rufino Tamayo," Arts, XXXIV (January, 1960), p. 53.


86 Paul Westheim, "The Art of Tamayo: A Study in Aesthetics" (Translated by W. Garnet), Artes de México, XII (May-June, 1956), p. 16.


Tamayo's ability to compose in three dimensions has been both praised and condemned. In a recent condemnation, it was written that all of his forms are on a single plane, superficially made to appear several. The same critic pointed out the artificiality of construction and composition, created by contrived diagonals and opposed arcs: the meaninglessness of the larger areas expose the absence of composition, in unity or contrast, which must have been intended. These criticisms were directed at one painting only, however. Ordinarily Tamayo constructs very balanced compositions, which themselves create a feeling of the third dimension.

Contemporary Mexican painting can be divided into three classifications. The first style, called "Transfigured Reality," uses representational forms for subjective expression. This classification has seen two stages: before the Second World War subjective reality was compromised with social commentary, and since the war there has been non-social subjective reality. Second, "Geometrical Abstraction" is a puristic style related to recent innovations in architecture. The third type is non-figurative "Lyrical Abstraction." Characteristics of today's styles of painting include a search for mystery, an interest in the concept of space, an inclination toward a tragic quality, and a striving for personal expression which consistently identifies the painter with his native heritage.

Pluralism of media gives today's painters a choice between monumental mural painting and easel painting. The popularity of the mural and the graphic arts as the ideal media is giving way to the rise of easel painting, paralleling the advent of a middle-class which prefers the smaller canvases. Tamayo, the leader of the non-Revolutionary movement, is known not as a muralist, but as an easel painter.

The change in popularity of certain media of art has paralleled the change in political philosophy. When radical socialism was practiced, mural painting monopolized the art world because it was public and monumental. It belonged to the masses and was understood by them. Now that capitalism has regained some of its pre-Revolutionary status, privately-owned easel painting has been demanded by the bourgeois exponents of the free enterprise system. Portrait painting has become popular, and two of the most important ones so far were done by Orozco, of President Alemán and Archbishop Luis Maria Martínez.

Thematic material has increasingly been directed to the educated

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89 Judd, _loc. cit._, p. 53.
40 The following system of classifying is taken from Fernando de Szyszlo, _loc. cit._, p. 144.
middle-classes, instead of solely to the masses. Artists have passed through the stage of emphasizing native Indian values, which obsessed them between 1920 and 1940, and now recognize the mestizo element as the essential ingredient in their cultural heritage. (There is a rough correlation between races and classes, so that the middle-class is predominantly mestizo.) Growing pride in economic nationalism has supplanted native cultural nationalism. The middle-class has also become the protector of the present-day return to humanism, which found artistic expression in the painting of Orozco, who elevated mankind by pointing out his spiritual qualities. On the other hand, Rivera had become outdated before his death, because he adhered to the earlier Marxist philosophy of the masses even though socialism was no longer in vogue with the middle-class-oriented government.

Nevertheless, artistic subject-matter has remained partially nationalist, because middle-class patrons have been well-educated in nationalism, and because the government has continued to patronize art as a way of instilling patriotism in the public mind. “Mexico still emphasizes, in its official policies and institutional activities, preponderantly indigenous values in art.”41 Whether it be a result of external or internal factors, the primary goal of contemporary painters is to convey national and indigenous values, modified by an intense interest in keeping abreast of international developments.

With the shift of political ideology toward capitalism, artistic themes likewise have changed. The emphasis today in both politics and art has shifted away from anti-foreignism, anti-clericalism, and anti-feudalism to economic achievement, international co-operation, humanism and religion. Today’s nationalism, artistic and political, has become less aggressive because the Revolutionary goals have generally been considered to be securely established, allowing positive objects to replace the negative ones.

This shift can be seen in the thematic content of Tamayo and his camp, who consistently choose to illustrate ideas and objects of universal, not national, interest. Tamayo paints people, animals, fruits, human relations, psychological insights. Mexican art, partially explicable as a reaction against the leadership of the Big Three, is moving toward a position of close relationship with other nations, just as politicians are abandoning policies of isolation in favor of international cooperation. Painters maintain their consciousness of regional identity, but within the context of modern Western culture: a simultaneous ex-

ploration of both international and indigenous traditions. The painter José Luis Cuevas has summed it up with this analogy: "What I want in my country's art are broad highways leading out to the rest of the world, rather than narrow paths connecting one adobe village with another."

Since 1940, painters have approved of the governmental emphasis on political democracy, government reforms, and civil rights. These are middle-class interests and needs, felt only after satisfying economic needs which provide for physical survival. The government has made efforts to improve relations with the Church and with foreign nations, and the artists have expressed diverse opinions in both areas. There has been less federal land and labor reform, and there has been less artistic attention paid to these earlier demands. The government's biggest concern and largest budget item has been industry and public works, and the painters have illustrated this interest.

As the Church has once again won greater acceptance in important segments of the middle-class, the art world has returned to the use of religious themes. The reverse is also true: the traditionally conservative Church, which has now developed its own more liberal program of social reform, is beginning to accept the Revolutionary art forms and subjects. "The clergy and the hierarchy are becoming more and more receptive to the idea of contemporary art." As usual, the most prevalent non-Revolutionary art theme during the present period has been sympathy toward the Church. Now that the Church is once more acceptable, Cantú is not alone in painting Christian themes; other artists have joined him, like Guillermo Meza, Charlot, and Leal. Orozco was unconsciously religious, and María Izquierda has relied thematically on the pagan Christianity which is a part of Mexico's synthesized mestizo culture.

Opposition to militarism has been a middle-class characteristic in Mexico, as witnessed in the recent trend toward civilian national executives. When the army was large, artists included the common foot soldier with the farmer and the worker in the trilogy of the downtrodden lower-classes. Today the soldier has generally disappeared from the pictorial representations of the current situation. The distance of forty years since the militant era of the Revolution has considerably

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42 Ibid., p. 25.
43 Ibid., p. 30.
44 Maurice Lavanoux, "Introduction," Liturgical Arts, XXIII (May, 1955), p. 74. This complete issue of Liturgical Arts was devoted to Mexican art and architecture.
diminished the volume of work produced on the theme of "the horrors of war." Today's "middle-class era" is definitely not a military period.

Replacing the manifestations of defensive nationalism — economic, political, and cultural — there is today revealed in pictures a general feeling of security. The contemporary Mexican painters depict a constructive and positive interpretation of their national situation.

An example of the general theme of economic security is Siqueiros' mural "Sunrise of Mexico," a joyous interpretation of a massive female figure, representing Mexico, embracing an armful of oil well rigs. In her ecstatic expression, Siqueiros has tried to capture the national rejoicing at the moment when the Mexican oil fields were taken away from English and American interests. As another tribute to economic independence from the United States and Great Britain, José Chávez Morado has created one of the murals on the new buildings of the Ministry of Communications and Public Works (SCOP). In fact, of all the murals at the new SCOP center, the only one which glorifies the proletariat, instead of the middle-class, is Juan O'Gorman's "Song to the Nation," in which the farmer and the worker receive gifts of agricultural and industrial products.45

An increased interest in science, technology, and industry has paralleled the growth of the middle-class. Early in the period Leal painted two murals in San Luis Potosí, "Triumph of the Locomotive" at the city railway station and "Machine Age" at the Church of San Juan de Dios.46 Rivera painted two panels on the history of scientific knowledge about diseases of the heart, at the National Institute of Cardiology. At the Social Security Hospital, he used the theme of "History of Medicine."

Both Chávez Morado and O'Gorman executed exterior murals at the SCOP buildings, praising contemporary advances in communications. Jorge González Camarena painted the mural "Mexico" in the office building of the Social Security Institute, following the general theme of the economic progress of Mexico in the field of science and industry. In the Auditorium of the Science Building at the University City, Chávez Morado painted the "Conquest of Energy," using nationalist symbols to indicate the intellectual and scientific attainments of Mexico. The national Polytechnical Institute was the scene of "Man the Master and Not the Slave of Technology," done by Siqueiros. In this study a man was shown standing in the center, dwarfed by the

44 Departamento de Difusión S.C.O.P., Centro SCOP (Mexico, 1956).
monstrous machines on each side of him, but confidently keeping control.

Orozco, too, employed the middle-class theme of economic stability and growth. In “National Riches,” a mural at the Supreme Court building, he advocated the wise use of natural resources domestically controlled. The picture contains a Mexican tiger, wrapped in the national flag, leaping protectively over five symbolic representations of subsoil wealth: gold, silver, copper, iron, and oil. Gold and silver are exhausted, symbolized by a skeleton and a mummy. Oil remains the most prevalent and active, shown as a hideous giant head with oil pouring out of its teeth.

The economic security of the rising middle-class was illustrated by Orozco in a mural for the Mexico City Turf Club, which depicted the frivolous philosophy of epicurean existentialism as a post-war relief from tensions. Economic prosperity and material ostentation were exposed in the scene of fashionably-dressed nouveaux riches consuming foods and wines and watching a dancing girl entertain.

The rise of middle-class control has been reflected artistically not only in subjects of economic security but also in expressions of political security. No longer is there a need for a nationalism of the kind that includes sentiments of anti-foreignism, isolation, and demands for political integrity; rather there is growing international co-operation since the Second World War. Inspired by the Mexican alliance with the United States during the war, Héctor D. Falcón drew a newspaper cartoon called “Scalp Hunter” depicting a North American Indian, representing both nations, in full war attire dancing toward the cowering cluster of Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo. A similar idea was illustrated by Leopoldo Méndez in a woodcut entitled “Just Vengeance,” in which a battle conflagration was the background of a Mexican raising an axe over Hitler and Mussolini, who were in the act of strangling a child. Luis Audirac drew Gandhi, who was highly respected in Mexico, looking disapprovingly at a paper marked “Atlantic Charter,” indicating that shapers of Mexican foreign policy were in the throes of deciding the national position in the imminent crisis. Growing interest and identification with the rest of the world was suggested in a Méndez woodcut, “The Letter,” showing a German mother weeping over the news of the death of her soldier-son. In low relief on the athletic stadium at the University City, Rivera used nativistic human figures to

47 Rafael Carrasco Puente, La caricatura en México (Mexico, 1953), p. 225.
48 Ibid., p. 197.
convey the idea of international understanding through Olympic games. Ciro’s Night Club at the Hotel Reforma employed Rivera to paint some decorative compositions geared for international tourist consumption. All these pictures named here are illustrations of Mexico’s growing awareness that it is a member of the world community.

Pictorial expressions of cultural nationalism have also changed, from elevating the Indian elements of the masses to representing the elements of the middle-class. Since 1940, painters have frequently illustrated the anthropological-ethnological formula of Mexico as the result of two components, Indian and European. In a mural entitled “Mexico” González Camarena depicted the modern Mexican nation rising up out of its two origins, by using the national symbol of the eagle clutching a serpent. The monumental bird is shown covered with construction scaffolding, towering above the fallen bodies of a Spanish conqueror and an Aztec warrior. Recognizing the native half of Mexico’s background, Tamayo painted “Homage to the Indian Race” at the National Museum of Plastic Arts, featuring a heroic-dimensioned Indian woman with a child and a laden basket. In contrast with its subject-matter, the mural was done in a sophisticated style which only the middle-class mentality would appreciate. At the Palace of Fine Arts Tamayo painted “Birth of Nationality,” showing a European horse and rider leaping over the ruins of Indian civilization, from which emerged a child, half Indian and half European. Similarly, Francisco Eppen designed “Life, Death, and the Four Elements” on the School of Medicine at the University City, which contained a head with three faces: an Indian mother on the left, a Spanish father on the right, and a mestizo offspring in the center, representing the Mexico of today.

The mestizo culture presently predominant finds the Church acceptable, and this has been echoed in the continual increase of religious paintings. Cantú produced a series of silverplate engravings illustrating themes from the litany of the Church, for the modernistic Purísima Church in Monterrey. Also, he engraved “The Last Supper” and painted a set of portraits of the apostles. González Camarena painted a “Crucifixion” mural in the Monterrey Church. Meza painted “The Crucified,” a portrayal of Christ crucified in the spiny arms of a maguey plant, an example of the Mexican practice of assimilating Indian and European elements. O’Gorman decorated the Bocanegra Library at Pátzcuaro with a mural which was very favorable toward the Church, especially in praising the work of the colonial Church with the Indians. Leal was commissioned to paint the entire interior of the Chapel of the Virgin of Guadalupe, where he illustrated, in seven murals, the legend
of the origin of the nation's patron saint. In Mexico City's Hospital of Jesus the Nazarene, Orozco created a tumultuous version of the Apocalypse. A geometric form representing God was surrounded by four floating figures, symbolizing the Gospel writers. Another section showed two humans grieving over tombs, and a pair of panels depicted angels struggling with "The Demon Bound" and "The Demon Freed."

The increased power of the Church was recently illustrated by two incidents involving artists and murals. The mural which Rivera painted for the Hotel del Prado, containing the inscription "God does not exist," had caused the Church to be outraged, devout Catholics to demonstrate, and the archbishop to refuse to bless the building. For years the painting was hidden behind boards, and was later uncovered minus the atheistic slogan. The Church also won the dispute with Rivera over his mural at the Theater of the Insurgents, where the artist was forced to paint out the controversial version of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Orozco, the humanist, remained consistently interested in the theme of the spiritual dimension of human life, especially in defending it against technology. Revolutionary policy had glorified the inventions of modern science, with no concern for the harm it caused the human psyche. Orozco spoke for the growth of conservative elements in society and politics, by emphasizing the worth of the individual. At the Hospital of Jesus the Nazarene he used the horse as a symbol of the machine age, being ridden by a figure who plunged a sword through some human bodies. His geometric conception, "National Allegory," at the National Teachers' College was intended to represent Mexico rising above the shackles of modern science and technology. The figure of a man was shown with his head in the clouds "in a moment of anguish, fighting desperately to overcome the most tremendous crisis."

Today artistic subject-matter includes themes of universal appeal, which conflicts with the earlier nationalistic emphasis. For example, Orozco painted exterior decorations on the President Alemán Apartment Project, using the theme of "Springtime." His death prevented an anticipated mural at the National Conservatory of Music, an abstract decoration of color equivalents of musical harmonies. There have been an increasing number of easel paintings on such universal subjects as

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49 Stewart, op. cit., p. 27.
52 Alma Reed, Orozco (New York, 1956), p. 305.
still-lives, especially by Tamayo. He even did a monumental-sized mural of “Fruit” at Sanborn’s in the building occupied by the American Embassy in Mexico City. Other recent titles used by Tamayo, revealing universal content, have been: “Matrimonial Portrait,” “Insomnia,” “Claustrophobia,” “Five Slices of Watermelon,” “Man and His Shadow,” “Animals,” “Two Personages,” “Man with a Penetrating Look.”

**Conclusion**

It appears evident that, at the present time, Mexican painting is going in the direction of conservatism. Painting is orienting itself to the values of the rising middle-class, through several manifestations: purpose and ideology, patronage, style, media, and content.

Both the original art movement, with its radical ideology and government-supported public murals, and the later conservative, “non-nationalistic” movement have enjoyed international acclaim. Especially throughout Latin America, Mexican art has exercised strong influence. This greater popularity of nationalistic art among the Latin American nations can be explained by the fact that they share the desire to conserve native roots. This, and “not unawareness nor insensitivity of the artists, ... is responsible for the fact that Latin American Painting has been less vulnerable to the enormous influence that contemporary painting of the United States exerts on the rest of the Western world.”

Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru were especially responsive to the example set by radical Mexican art, because these countries likewise had a strong indigenous population and a medieval social structure; and in the 1920’s they developed “indigenist schools” which almost immediately found official backing.

Siqueiros claims — and here he is referring to the initial movement — that the cause for its international recognition is its social and political ideology. He considers it a tragedy that Mexican art is losing its social purpose, which characteristic has been its primary essence, giving it prominent position in the total history of art. It has deserved to occupy a front row seat in the concert of universal culture.

The whole controversy, waging between the first and second waves of twentieth-century Mexican art, can be condensed to the philosophical question of the moral value of art versus the aesthetic value of art. Speak-
ing for art’s raison d’être on purely aesthetic grounds Tamayo claims that there is no “place in art for political or ideological manifestations. Painting, is painting … and there is no need of mixing it with any other thing. That has been the error of Mexican painting.”

Painting like the other arts, has a right to exist with no added apology than its power of communication with the spectator — or some even go further to insist that painting holds no obligation to communicate, but only to be an honest expression of the artist himself. Painting owes no debts beyond the sheer beauty of its form, texture, color, and composition. Bernard Berenson’s criterion for measuring the success of a painting is the degree of tactile response it can elicit: i.e., the picture should be such a perfect representation of reality (objective or non-objective) that sensations are aroused to a greater degree than is possible when confronting the actual object or experience.

According to the theory of “art for art’s sake,” the content of painting is irrelevant; it does not matter what one paints. This attitude implies no responsibility whatsoever to society, the only moral code being artistic ethics. That is, if a painter is honest in regard to himself and his craft, he earns the right to act without integrity toward the human community. Humanly detrimental themes may be illustrated, if done by means of excellent art techniques.

At the opposite extreme, the use of painting for political and propaganda purposes, is equally uncommendable. Under the conditions of state-supported art, painters cannot retain their full freedom to pursue honestly and purely their creative vocation. “Just as Art for Art’s sake simply disregards the world of morality, and the values of human life, and the fact that an artist is a man; so the motto Art for the People simply disregards the world of art itself, and the values of the creative intellect, and the fact that an artist is an artist.”

Jacques Maritain claims that the ideal role of the artist lies between these two poles. Painters do occupy a position of responsibility toward society, but “society” is an all-inclusive concept, of which the state is only the top level. The artist must dedicate himself to the edification of humanity. The only circumstance which can justify an official government art is the coincidence of these two values: an ideological art for the people of all classes, and the artistic genius creating for the good of the work.

The sympathetic critics of Mexico’s radical painting, which began

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56 Tamayo, in Diario Las Américas, loc. cit.
exactly fifty years ago, claim that that is what occurred in the case of the Mexican artists. As a unique phenomenon in the history of world art, the group of painters were equally skilled in their creative craft as they were devoted to their political ideology. That which motivated the artists was fully integrated with their own creative subjectivity and creative experience; the passion had been internalized in the creative source.\(^{59}\)

The second phase of the art movement in twentieth century Mexico, led by Tamayo, tends toward the philosophy of art-for-art's-sake, to preserve the values and standards and ethics of art per se. The original movement, led by Rivera and Siqueiros, tended toward a full-fledged state art for the people. Within the bounds of the Mexican nation, the world can observe an example in microcosm of the universal and endless dilemma of the responsibility of the artist.

In the case of Mexico, social, political, and economic reasons can be rallied to explain the shift in popularity of aesthetic philosophies. The growing strength of the middle-class parallels the growing appreciation for pure artistic values.

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