

# OROZCO AND SIQUEIROS AT THE ACADEMY OF SAN CARLOS<sup>1</sup>

*Jean Charlot*

## I

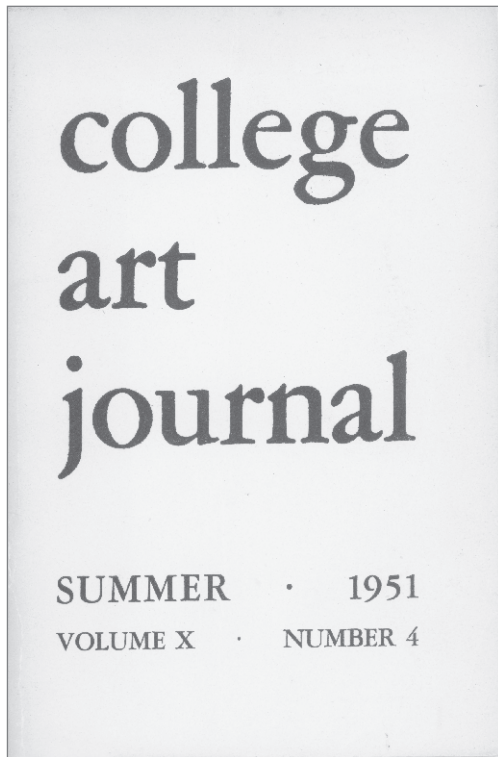
The first mention I found of José Clemente Orozco in the archives of the Academy of San Carlos dates of May, 1906. He was then already twenty-four years of age, older than the average art student at the school. This is explained by the fact that his first serious pursuit having been scientific agriculture, art had, up to then, fared as no more than an avocation. That Orozco must have already studied at the Academy before 1906 is implied, however, by the fact that typically, this first recorded activity was part of a collective motion for self-expulsion!

In 1906, Don Antonio Fabres, sub-director of the school, was on the way out. Three years before, as the personal nominee of the President of the Republic, General Don Porfirio Díaz, he figured as a political power, with a salary of 7,200 pesos that exceeded even that of the Director, mildmannered architect Don Antonio Rivas Mercado. Now that

the lengthy feud he had fought with Mercado neared its end, Fabres realized that he would never reach his goal, that was no less than the directorship of the school. He still gave two night classes, one of the nude and one of the costumed model, but attended them only halfheartedly. Oftentimes he failed to come, or left before time. The model would leave early too. A few students would follow the model, and, soon after that, the class would exit in toto.

The janitor, Lino Lebrija, posted notices at strategic corners, to remind the students how it was absolutely forbidden to leave between class hours, and he and his helpers stood guard by the main entrance, reprovingly. It was his duty as well to redact reports of such incidents for the Director; wherein he

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Portada de la revista donde se publicó originalmente este artículo.

used to refer to himself in the third person, dispassionately:

Disobeying your orders, two of the students of Professor Antonio Fabres started a rumpus the evening of the 7th of the current month, May, 1906. Its outcome was the exit of all the students out of these two classes, when the janitor his aids found themselves helpless to restore order ...

Such a scene was reenacted yesterday, and student García Núñez, while wrestling with the janitor, tore loose the bell-pull of the door ...<sup>2</sup>

Two of the more pugnacious youngsters, García Núñez and a fellow agitator, Carlos Zaldívar, were expelled for fifteen days. Promptly, a petition in their favor was placed before the Director; it was signed by ten of Fabres' students and given added weight by the following postscriptum: "The other students who were not there at the time of signing are nevertheless in agreement with what it says".

The petition ran:

It is with intense surprise that we heard of the order to expulse from the school our fellow students because they left before time ... Had this happened with a view to promoting disorder, such punishment would be justified ... However, if we left, it is only because there was no model—he was gone at 8:00 P.M.— and so no further purpose in keeping to the classroom. If these two students deserve punishment, then we shall consider ourselves as equally expelled together with them, that is, all of us who left the building that night ...<sup>3</sup>

Among the ten signers was José Clemente Orozco. Probably with an eye to resulting demerits, some bureaucrat checked beside each student's name what classes he attended. One name received only a cross, with the remark, "Is not a student of the school". Orozco's name rated also a

<sup>2</sup>Archives of San Carlos, 1906-34.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

cross and nothing else. This suggests that, at the time, he was not as yet a registered student.

The next year, 1907, Orozco was included in the alphabetical list of registered students. By 1910, he was referred to as a senior student of life-class when his contest drawing was adjudged hors-concours, a rating which implies that he had previously received his full share of honors.

1910 was Centennial Year, with many festivities planned for September, to commemorate Hidalgo's uprising that resulted in Mexico's political independence from Spain. The President of the Republic, Don Porfirio Díaz, with a kind of surrealistic illogic, ruled that a gigantic display of contemporary Spanish art should add fitting gloss to the celebration. Towards this end, a government subvention of 35,000 pesos was readily earmarked, and a specially constructed exhibition building thrown in.<sup>4</sup>

Young Mexican artists, mostly students of the Academy, were naturally nonplussed. They decided to put up their own display of national art, either totally forgotten or wilfully slighted by the Presidential decree. In the name of the members of the Society of Mexican Painters and Sculptors, Gerardo Murillo –the future Dr. Atl– wrote to Director Rivas Mercado, July 18, asking him for the use of "the classroom of first year of architecture, the exhibition hall, and the corridors of the second floor, to make possible the exhibition



David Alfaro Siqueiros en la Escuela Nacional Preparatoria cuando se constituye la Conferederación Sindical Unitaria de México, 1929. Foto: Acervo Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros/INBA/CONACULTA.

that the Society has planned for the Centennial Year".<sup>5</sup>

Not only did [Rivas] Mercado let the young patriots have the use of

<sup>4</sup>*Boletín de Instrucción Pública*, T. XV, 1910, p. 710.

<sup>5</sup>Archives S.C., 1910-18.



*Los elementos*, 1922-1923, Foto: Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint/IIE.

the building, but he also contributed 300 pesos of his own towards expenses. In turn, Justo Sierra, Secretary of Education managed to add a subvention of 3,000 pesos.<sup>6</sup>

Hung without fanfare in the corridors of the school, this *Show of Works of National Art* overshadows in retrospect the other, more blatant, display of Spanish painting. In the Academy show, racial consciousness anticipated the creation of a truly Mexican style. Saturnino Herrán exhibited *The Legend of the Volcanoes*, after an Indian myth; Jorge Enci-

so contributed *Anahuac*, a life-size Indian silhouetted against the dawn. Orozco was represented by cartoons and charcoal drawings, now lost, but recorded in print in the official memorial album of the festivities, "J.T. [sic] Orozco exhibits many caricatures and compositions. The former are typical, of strong draftsmanship, with lines bold and firm, supremely expressive and full of very deep intentions. The latter are in the same vein. Their tormented and convulsive attitudes bring somehow to mind Rodin's drawings".<sup>7</sup>

One senses justified pride in the thanks that the Association sent [Rivas] Mercado at the close of the show: "The signers, members of the Society of Mexican Painters and Sculptors, are deeply grateful for the active and great good will with which you helped us realize this first exhibition of National Art". The letter is signed by Gerardo Murillo as manager, and, among the members, by Orozco.<sup>8</sup>

The Society celebrated further with a "victory" dinner held in Santa Anita, to thank Murillo for his exertions. Besides hot chile dishes there must have been more than soft drinks, if we may judge from a news photograph of gesticulating artists hoisting a beaming bearded Murillo onto their swaying shoulders, with Orozco at the

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.* 3.

<sup>7</sup>Genaro García, *Crónica oficial de las fiestas del primer centenario*, México, 1911.

<sup>8</sup>Archives S.C., 1910-19: "Circulares".

bottom of the pile, facing the camera and squinting in the sun.

Orozco's further studies at the Academy of San Carlos spanned the more tempestuous days of the military Revolution. If the artist gained, then and there, the knowledge he expected to gain of anatomy and of perspective, he also came, as a student, in astonishingly close contact with the dynamics of civil war that constitute the other pole of his complex stylistic formation.

The fall of Porfirio Díaz –after a semi-benevolent dictatorship that lasted nearly forty years– happened soon after the Centennial festivities. His political opponent, Francisco I. Madero, made a triumphal entry into the Capital in mid-1911, bowing to cheering crowds from a landau drawn by white percheros and manned by liveried coachmen. The young art students, drunk with the taste of new freedom, lustfully injected unrest in the hallowed routine of the sheltered Academy. As studies suffered, the faculty retaliated with demerits. In May, 1911, in the contest of coloring, a class taught by Germán Gedovius, Orozco failed to pass.<sup>9</sup>

The next month, a great student strike began. It paralleled within the school the political revolution that was to rage for a decade outside its walls. At first, the strike was limited to the class of anatomy taught by Don Daniel Vergara Lope. His students objected to his dictatorial leanings, at variance

with the novel political trend. They also rebelled at having to pay instructor for each of the mimeographed sheets that served as makeshift textbooks, comparing them disdainfully with the penny sheets of the publisher Vanegas Arroyo, blind to what meaning future generations would read in these folk productions.

As the strike spread, the janitor was increasingly busy tearing subversive posters and slogans off the walls and dumping them on the desk of the Director, from where they eventually found their way safely into the archives. One of the mildest of these papers, hastily scrawled in blue ink and still gummed at the back, reads, "Because of the stupidity of Professor Vergara Lope, no one should attend the class of anatomy".

With the fall of Díaz, his brain trust of technocrats, nicknamed by the masses *los científicos* –the scientific ones– fell equally into discredit. Another school pasquin ended loud and raw, in true revolutionary style, "... Long live Democracy! Down with the scientific ones in this school! Freedom of election. Liberty and Constitution.

"Mexico, July 15 of the Year of Freedoms."<sup>10</sup>

August 17, an ominous plea from Francisco Urquidí, the school secretary, reached General Rodrigo Valdés, Chief of Police of Mexico City, "... Plea-

<sup>9</sup>Archives S. C., 1911-29: "Concursos".

<sup>10</sup>Both papers, *ibid.* 1911-36.



Detalle. Escuela Nacional Preparatoria.  
Foto: Pedro Cuevas, Archivo Fotográfico  
Manuel Toussaint/IIE.

se send us four policemen to keep order in the Institution. A number of discontented students station themselves by the door at 7 P.M., to dissuade their schoolmates from entering".<sup>11</sup>

August 28, undaunted by police measures, the strikers staged mayhem upon the director. Though handicapped both by his age and his girth, Rivas Mercado withstood the assault with

gallantry, if not with coolness. His own version of the affray, redacted that same day for his superior, the Secretary of Education, Don Justo Sierra, still exists in the archives. It is a first draft, and hard to read, scrawled that it was in the heat of righteous indignation, and filled with erasures and corrections meant to preserve dignity in the midst of mild ridicule:

As I reached, this noon, the Institution, together with my lady, I was faced by a group of dissatisfied students voicing threats and insults. Far from intimidated, I descended from my automobile and, immediately, was attacked by the strikers who hurled various missiles —eggs, tomatoes, stones and other things. One of the projectiles hit me on the nose, producing a nose bleed.

Though under attack, I advanced towards the group, my objective being to catch one of them; this I managed to do in the person of trouble-maker Francisco Rangel. The rest policeman holding Rangel ...In the street, they continued proffering insults, notwithstanding the presence of my wife who having scattered, I proceed on foot towards the second police precinct, accompanied by a followed me in the automobile. The chauffeur was manhandled and a striker, wrenching free the hood of one of the lanterns, threw it at my wife inside the automobile...<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1911-13: "Correspondencia del Secretario Francisco Urquidí".

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1911-36.

The strike was still on when, eight months after the affray, stubborn Rivas Mercado resigned. Orozco, now thirty years old, acted throughout the disorders as elder counsellor to his fellow students, who were mostly still in their teens. A news snapshot shows him holding a sheaf of diplomatic looking papers and peering owlishly through thick lenses, ready to enter the office of the Secretary of Education for an attempt at mediation.

President Madero was shot in 1913. His successor, General Huerta, was in turn forcefully removed by First Chief Carranza. The latter's choice to head the school fell on Gerardo Murillo –alias Dr. Atl. Forthright documents remain in the archives that tell of Atl's tempestuous passage through the school, backed by the vivid memories of those who worked with him.

A memorandum, dated October 6, 1914, was sent by Atl to Ingeniero F. Palavicini, Secretary of Education: "I will submit a plan of total reorganization of the so-called teaching of the Fine Arts, beginning naturally with a thorough clean-up of teachers, classrooms and store-rooms, given that everything within the school is filthy dirty".

Another note, addressed to the Inspector General Of Physical Education, was written that same day: "I can assure you that, if ever a class of physical culture was started in this

school of Fine Arts, the whole Institution would collapse instantly. Once insured the organic equilibrium of the students, they would lose interest in such intellectual masturbations as are the sole fruit, up to now, of all academic institutions. "I intend to reorganize this so-called School of Fine Arts along practical lines, changing its name to that of workshop, where workers will be able to do three things: bathe, work, and make money".<sup>13</sup>

Orozco felt grateful towards Atl, who acclaimed him as already a great artist, and decided to follow his political fortunes. When the troops of Pancho Villa, closing on the Capital, forced Carranza and his followers to take refuge in the State of Veracruz, Atl followed, and established a "school in exile" in Orizaba. *La Vanguardia* was printed there; it was a sheet meant to bolster the morale of the troops in the field, illustrated mostly by Orozco.

The next mention of Orozco dates of the next decade. January 12, 1922, the Director of the School, Ramos Martínez wrote to José Vasconcelos, Secretary of Education, "I earnestly recommend that you name the citizen José Clemente Orozco to the post of fourth Professor of Elementary Drawing. Vacant at present, the post is already inclu-

<sup>13</sup>Both papers, *Íbid.*, 1914-1: "Asuntos varios".

ded in the budget of expenses for the current year".

The request was granted, and Orozco taught night class, for a daily stipend of 7.00 pesos. The class was attended by fifteen students.<sup>14</sup>

Do you swear to fulfill loyally and patriotically the post of that the \_\_\_\_ Constitutional President has conferred upon you; to be zealous in everything and care for the major good and prosperity of our Union? The person thus interrogated having answered, 'I swear it,' the Citizen Secretary proceeded, 'Should you fail to do so, the Nation will bring you to account for it.'<sup>15</sup>

This text being a standard printed form, with only the particulars of the job left blank, to be filled in each individual case by hand, one may doubt that this impressive scene ever took place. However, the filled-in form is duly signed by José Vasconcelos for the Government, and by Orozco as its employee.

As assistant draftsman, Orozco took a small part in the publication of the Classics in a low price edition that was one of philosopher Vasconcelos' favored projects. The artist designed the chapter-heads and tail-pieces of the *Dante*.

As teacher of elementary drawing, Orozco dutifully put his signature to a number of the collective circulars that all members of the faculty were bid to read and to sign. The bureaucratic

wording of most of these documents makes it doubtful that Orozco, or any of the other artists-teachers, always knew what they were about. Typical is an unnumbered circular, issued January 18, 1923, "Incumbent to the initial payment of salary to Federal employees, Paragraph 82 of the Law promulgated May 23, 1910, specifies that a copy of the corresponding nomination be produced. This provision was rendered obsolete after the Fundamental Charter creating the post of Controller General became operative, but, subsequently, the dispositions therein included have been revalidated by Circular No. 25, issued by this Department ..."

Other texts were clear enough, such as No. 5, issued February 6, "After the second unjustified fault committed by a member of the faculty of an institution of learning, a fine will be levied, to be in a ratio proportionate to the amount of his salary, to be repeated for each further offense ..."

Circular No. 13, April 23, "Notice has come to this Ministry that a number of teachers and employees of the School in your charge fulfill their duties with slackness, arriving late to work or failing altogether to come ..."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Nomination, *Íbid.*, 1922-105: "Personal docente de las clases nocturnas". Report on class, *Íbid.*, 1922-75. The report is dated April, 1922.

<sup>15</sup>Archivos de la Secretaría de Educación, 1-25-10-63.1/131 (IV-3)/80.0

<sup>16</sup>All circulars, archives S.C., 1923-14, "Circulares".





*El entierro del  
obrero sacrificado,*  
1923-1924.  
Escuela Nacional  
Preparatoria.  
Foto: Archivo  
Fotográfico  
Manuel Toussaint/  
IIE.

The last of the circulars that Orozco signed, and thus the last that he presumably read, is No. 17 announcing a faculty meeting to be held June 6, 1923. It is doubtful that he attended it, and probable that from then on, Orozco could have been described by strict bureaucrats as "... arriving late to work or failing altogether to come ... "for, on June 7, he began the fulltime work on the mural decoration of the main patio of the Preparatoria school, having completed the gigantic plan and some of the detailed studies in the little time left between his two clerical jobs.

One last document marks the turning point in Orozco's career, when he stepped from the local stage of his patria into the spotlight of international fame:

José Clemente Orozco, 316 W. 23rd  
St. New York City, NY USA.

To the President of the National University of México.

The petitioner, professor of modeling in night class at the Academy of Fine Arts states:

That, finding himself in this City for the purpose of opening an exhibition of his works, and needing to remain for a while in foreign parts, he requests that you be willing to grant him a leave of absence without pay, valid for six months; its purpose that of dedicating himself to the previously mentioned activities ...

New York City, NY

February 1, 1928

José Clemente Orozco<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Archivos de la Universidad Nacional. Archivo general, carpeta 1562. Orozco's show opened at the Marie Sterner Galleries, on 57th Street, in June, 1928.

## II

Alfaro Siqueiros wistfully states that he was scarcely big enough to take part in the great strike of 1911 at the Academy of San Carlos. He admits in conversation that, "... all I did then was to throw a few stones at things or at people, and little else". Somewhat at odds with this self-effacing admission is the fact that Siqueiros –then thirteen years old– landed in jail with some of the ring leaders, there to be consoled by a gift of chocolates from an anonymous well-wisher.

The next year, 1912, he weathered successfully his examination in a branch of painting in which he was indeed to become a master, "Class of chiaroscuro: Alfaro, José David. Passing grade".<sup>18</sup>

The artist dates his first mature remembrances as a student from the year 1913, in the days of President Huerta. In an election freely held by both teachers and students, Ramos Martínez –who was the candidate of the anti-academic element within the Academy– won the Directorship of the school. At that time and in that milieu his style of painting, courting, as it did, Whistler and Impressionism, carried the impact of a revolutionary manifesto.

Irrelevant of a style that [Ramos] Martínez himself would outgrow, it proved of crucial importance for the generation of Siqueiros that the new Director already thought in terms of a Mexican art, and strived to put his

students in daily contact with Mexican subject-matter. Though arrived at with all the gentleness that characterized his actions, this was a true revolution against the modish attitude of local connoisseurs who advocated an increasing dependency on recognized European masters, men of the caliber of Gér-me, Roybet and Meissonier.

[Ramos] Martínez stated his aims in a letter to the Secretary of Public Education, September 29, 1913, "It is the wish of the Direction of the Academy that its students of painting work from the model, and in direct contact with nature, in locations where the foliage and perspective effects be true the character of our *patria*.

"The aim is to awake the enthusiasm of the students for the beauty of our own land, thus giving birth to an art worthy of being called genuinely national ...". Following this premise, [Ramos] Martínez asked permission to take students away from the twilight of the classroom into the sunlight of the countryside.<sup>19</sup>

Permission was obtained and a lease signed, October 17, for a house and garden on the outskirts of Mexico City, "The Direction of the National Academy of Fine Arts is renting the house situated on Hidalgo Street, No. 25 ... in the village of Santa Anita Ixtapalapa, that includes

<sup>18</sup>Archives of San Carlos, 1912-19: "Concursos"

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 1913-21: "Clase en Santa Anita".



*El llamado a la libertad*, 1924.  
Foto: Archivo CNCRPAM/INBA.

dining-room, bedroom, front room, corridor and garden. A class of painting will be installed there, marking possible the direct study from nature ..., The monthly rental to be 30.00".<sup>20</sup>

Thus was started the now famous school of Santa Anita, forerunner of

the many open-air schools that flourished in Mexico during the nineteen-twenties. Flushed with the memories of a stay in Paris and a Salon Medal, [Ramos] Martínez stressed the French

<sup>20</sup>*ibid.*

flavor in his teaching, though not in the choice of subject-matter. He encouraged his students by addressing each after the name of a famous master, Renoir, Manet, Monet, even Cézanne. The school itself he dubbed "Barbizon", to underline the rustic character of the surroundings wherein this zealous group of landscapists labored. Photographs show easels set around the chipped *azulejos* fountain in the center of the open patio. Plaster casts transferred there from the storerooms of the Academy vied in attractiveness with live Indian models, and all were set against a natural backdrop of upright poplars, mirrored in the shimmering waters of the Santa Anita canal.

Dating from that period, a mimeographed form with manuscript additions constitutes Siqueiro's earliest autobiography:

Birthplace: Chihuahua City, State of Chihuahua.

Age: 17.

Residence: Fifth Street of Altamirano, No. 101.

Father: Cipriano Alfaro

Residence: Same address.

Occupation: Student.

Diplomas: High School.

When first registered in this school: 1912.

Curriculum: The undersigned is currently a student at Barbizon, in the classes of painting.

Mexico, March 4, 1914.  
Petitioner: José D. Alfaro.<sup>21</sup>

Twofold were the recorded activities of Siqueiros at Barbizon. His schoolmates still speak of his extravagant adolescent appetite that led him to Machiavellian plots: he exalted loudly the esthetic virtues of still-life painting, and especially the rendering of fruits and other edibles; then, often without waiting for a friend to finish a picture, Siqueiros borrowed and stealthily devoured the models. Not denying this, the artist prefers to tell how, under the cloak of protection spread by the gentle unworldlines of [Ramos] Martínez, there were underground political meetings at Barbizon, where plots were hatched against the dictatorial Huerta regime.

Between eating, conspiring, and presumably painting, Siqueiros passed at the school most the day and much of the night, and his sedate father wondered at this excess of zeal:

December 17, 1913.

Señor Don Alfredo Ramos Martínez,  
Director of the National Academy  
of Fine Arts.

Most esteemed Sir,

It is as the father of student José David Alfaro that I make bold to intrude on your busy time. Could you let me know until what hours of the night do the students stay in this Academy or house of Santa Anita. Indeed, this son of mine returns home haphazardly, more often than not after 10

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1914: "Inscripciones de alumnos numerarios".

PM., and at other times I do not even know when; always swearing that only his studies keep him there.

Your answer will doubtless contribute to the order that should reign in the home. My questions are born of the imperious duty that is mine to watch over the conduct of my son as well as care for his health, bound to be adversely affected by the irregularity of sleep and meal times. I trust that you will not refuse me the data asked for.

Receive my anticipated thanks ...

Cipriano Alfaro.<sup>22</sup>

[Ramos] Martínez answered:

Your son, the young José David Alfaro, assists indeed at the classes of painting from nature given in Santa Anita under my supervision, but only in the useful hours of the day. That is before nightfall.

A few students have received from the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts small allowances that help them further their studies, and they have permission to live on the premises where the classes are given. They remain there as in an internate, but your son is not among them ...<sup>23</sup>

When, on the shifting political scene, First Chief Carranza ousted President Huerta, [Ramos] Martínez was replaced at the school by Dr. Atl. Unlike [Ramos] Martínez, who wished to bring his students in closer contact with nature and local color, Atl meant to strengthen their imagination along cosmic lines. Hence, "Operative from this date, and valid

until countermanded, there will be in this school no more live models. Mexico, September 12, 1914 ... Dr. Atl".<sup>24</sup>

In the revolutionary free-for-all, Pancho Villa got the upper hand soon after that. Siqueiros, siding with the beaten Carranza, was one of the group of San Carlos students who fled from the Capital to provincial Orizaba. Feeling as yet not close enough to the battlefield, Siqueiros left the group for forthright military pursuits, the youngest officer on the staff of General Diéguez, steady foe of Villa. The painter proved a good soldier, and his companions-at-arms considered his art his only weakness. Once, when Siqueiros offered to sketch General Diéguez, the crusty old man exploded, "I will not have my photograph taken by a boy still wet behind the ears!"

Carranza once more ascended to power, and this time he felt seated securely enough in the Presidential chair to reward the faithfuls of leaner days. When the turn of Siqueiros came, his dual aptitude was duly acknowledged: as a young officer of the Revolution, he received a small diplomatic plum for his expected share; as a promising young artist and ex-student of the Academy, he

<sup>22</sup>*ibid.*, 1914-10: "Correspondencia del Director".

<sup>23</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>*ibid.*, 1914-1: "Asuntos varios".

was given, as also was customary, a fellowship to further his studies of painting in Europe.

In practice, this double award proved cumbersome. Later on, in a letter to José Vasconcelos, President of the National University, sent from Paris and dated September 29, 1921, Siqueiros reminisced on these quandaries,

...The Government of Señor Carranza ... sent me to Barcelona in the quality of First Chancellor of the Mexican Consulate, and with the added character of art-fellow.

The turn given to the affair did put me in a difficult position. I was required to make act of presence at the offices of the Consulate from 9 A.M. to 7 P.M., and thus found myself unable, during the year and a half that this situation lasted, to fulfill the object of my trip.

When Señor Obregón became President of the Republic, I started gestures through my friend and companion, Juan de Dios Bojorquez—at present the representative of our country in Honduras—to remedy a situation that was sufficiently abnormal to wreck both the internal mechanism of the Consulate and my personal ambitions. As the agreement now stands, the University over which you so ably preside grants me a monthly pension of 300 pesos. To accept this new arrangement, I had to discard a salary much superior ...<sup>25</sup>

Siqueiros was writing under the apprehension that pension was to be cancelled soon:

... I received this help for only five months; that is a barely sufficient time to orient my efforts in the artistic milieu of Paris, and it is a totally insufficient one to do the same in the artistic milieu of Europe. Nevertheless, I have worked zealously to prepare an exhibition of my pictures that is to open at the Galleries Bernheim Jeune this forth coming May.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, Vasconcelos, up to then President of the University, was making ready to head the newly created Ministry of Education. He was rounding up the best of Mexican artist—musicians, painters and poets—to launch the cultural renaissance that was his favored topic; and he sensed that restless Siqueiros might prove a worthy factor. Vasconcelos wrote to the young artist a soothing letter, October 22, 1921:

... José Vasconcelos salutes his esteemed friend, Señor Alfaro Siqueiros ... and states that it is with pleasure that the pension will be continued for the whole of the coming year, thus enabling him to further his pictorial studies in Europe.

He [Vasconcelos] also asserts that if at any time Siqueiros wishes to return, he may rest assured of making headway here also and of

<sup>25</sup>Archives of the Ministry of Education: "Siqueiros, 1-21-6-10", for this letter and the following nine documents.

<sup>26</sup>Archives of San Carlos, 1923-114: "Partes del Conserje".

creating for himself a position superior even to what he could hope for in those [other] tired countries.

Siqueiros, failing to realize from distant Europe the magnitude of the Mexican project, overlooked the artful bait by which the risen politician sought to speed his return. The painter clung instead to the idea of pension and of a Paris show, and enlisted to the purpose the help of his trusted friend, Juan de Dios Bojorquez:

Legation of the United States of Mexico in Honduras. Tegucigalpa, November 9, 1921.

Señor Don José Vasconcelos, President of the National University.

... Alfaro also states that, if he could be assured of his pension for one or two more years the Government could bank on his gratitude; that he would doubtless add luster to the name of Mexico in foreign parts. His confidence in his own talent is unshakable and there is also the fact he is a born worker:

I earnestly beg you not to forsake Alfaro Siqueiros, ex-captain in the Revolution, great dreamer, and future national glory ...

Juan de Dios Bojórquez

December 19, it was the turn of Señor González, Mexican Consul in Paris, to lobby for art's sake. He wired Vasconcelos that, if money was not urgently sent, the situation of the Mexican art-fellows stranded in Euro-

pe, including that of Siqueiros, would become truly critical.

January 5, 1922, Vasconcelos, now Secretary of Education, wrote in earnest of his plans to Siqueiros, and this time made an imprint on the young artist's mind. Though the original letter is now lost, we may surmise its importance from the answer of the painter, dated February 2:

To Licenciado Don José Vasconcelos, Secretary of Public Education, Mexico.

... Answering yours of January 5, wherein you state that you do not think timely my plans for an exhibition.

Before anything else, I must sincerely confess that the enthusiasm that your letter breathes intensifies my great desire to return to the patria, there to collaborate with all my resources to the common task.

I am in total agreement with your basic idea, "To create a new civilization extracted from the very bowels of Mexico", and firmly believe that our youths will rally to this banner ... When I asked for a furtherance of my pension, I meant to study part of that year in Italy and part in Spain before returning to Mexico; but your intelligent initiative in matters esthetic has given me A LONGING TO RETURN SOONER THAN THAT TO THE FATHERLAND AND TO START WORK THERE ...

Though agreeing in principle with the blue-print of a Mexican cultural renaissance so suddenly displayed

before his eyes, Siqueiros hesitated to throw overboard the memory of the treasures so recently contacted in France and Spain, and he gave voice to these reservations:

... As concerns us, Mexicans and Latin-Americans in general, a knowledge of the artistic tradition of Europe –that is also in part our tradition– and of its contemporary trends remains pertinent, inasmuch as it illustrates the workings of an unavoidable universal process according to which the Europeans are today the masters. Yesterday, it was the turn of the Orient; tomorrow will be our turn. We cannot pull apart without fatal consequences, as this evolution obeys genic laws, and also because our racial individuality emerges clarified and strengthened by comparison. To witness our racial individuality emerges clarified and strengthened by comparison. To witness Europe's actual achievement is to touch the very wound of its decadence and to acquire faith in our future ... We are at the meeting ground between Orient and Occident, between rationalism and sensuousness, and this fact should mold the character of our own civilization.

In the balance of the letter, Siqueiros delineated his new plans, including a show to be held, this time, in Mexico City; also,

... could you advance me here 700 pesos to be discounted at the rate of 100 pesos per month from the 300 monthly that I receive. This

amount is approximately what I intend to spend on art materials, and it would mean a substantial economy to buy them here as they cost much more there, and besides I could not find there the brand that I use.

May I remind you that, two and a half years ago, I was sent to the Consulate of Barcelona with the character of art-fellow, and with travel expenses paid for. Given this precedent, I ask the necessary allowance for my return ...

Vasconcelos to Siqueiros, February 27, 1922:

...Your plans seem very good and I have advised the Department of Pensions to take them into account. In case you decide to come back in May or at mid-year, we will forward your travel expenses as soon as you wire us concerning your return ... We will send a sum of 1200 pesos, and you may apart some of it towards material expenses ...

Siqueiros wired Vasconcelos, April 16, "SUM NEEDED RETURN MEXICO NEXT BOAT SITUATION PARIS CONSULATE MOST URGENT".

The next day, Vasconcelos sent Siqueiros one thousand pesos, specifying that they be used "to return to Mexico".

July 6, Siqueiros, from Rome, wrote to Vasconcelos a lengthy plea: the artist had spent so much money on art materials that he had not enough left to buy his return ticket, "...You will see that I am faced with a grave defalcation ... I am in





José Clemente Orozco, *Fuerzas revolucionarias*, 1924-1926. Escuela Nacional Preparatoria.  
Foto: Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint/IEE.

danger of having to stay in Madrid, where I will arrive in a few days, and in very sharp money difficulties ..."

Patient Vasconcelos advanced the needed sum, cautiously stating however that, if Siqueiros failed to return this time, his pension was to cease automatically. Siqueiros arrived in Mexico City in August.

At that date, the mural renaissance was already under way, with a handful of muralists at work on the walls of the Preparatoria School. Joining them, Siqueiros chose for himself one of its stairwells, that of the

*Collegio Chico* (sic), a cluster of walls and vaults, curved or slanted, that lends itself to further optical elaborations. His first realized panel, *The Spirit of Occident Alighting on the Americas*, shows, in its chiaroscuro both soft and strong, the impact made on the artist's mind and eye by the frescoes of Masaccio.

The opportunity to paint this first mural, heading as it did Siqueiros towards the carrier that best suited his monumental gifts, already fulfilled potentially the promise made by the Secretary of, "... a position superior even to

what he [ Siqueiros] could hope for in those [other] tired countries".

Financial plenty, that had at least been hinted at, proved more elusive. Official demands for money to be spent on the painting of murals were camouflaged artfully to pass, when possible, the scrutiny of a Congress whose heart was lost to the military, and that remained quite immune to esthetics. At the time that Siqueiros worked on his first set of murals, he was paid 3.00 [pesos] per day as, "Teacher No. 59 of Drawing and Manual Crafts"; he also was "Assistant to the Director of the Department of Plastic Workshops", a Directorship that, in turn, had been specifically created by Vasconcelos to provide a living for Diego Rivera; a little later, Siqueiros also turned up as, "Assistant smith in the bronze foundry attached to the Department of Fine Arts", a job that paid him 6.00 [pesos] per day.

When documents are the only source of knowledge, one must, at times, be led to false conclusions,

# Documentos



David Alfaro Siqueiros en la Escuela Nacional Preparatoria con Graciela Amador, Gontier, Contreras, Posadas, Chon Hernández, Escobar y otros líderes obreros cuando se constituye la Confederación Sindical Unitaria de México, 1929. Foto: Acervo Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros/ INBA/CONACULTA.