MORE THAN MURALS

THE STORY OF MEXICAN MODERNISM IS BEING RETOLD AS COLLECTORS DISCOVER THE RICH VARIETY OF LESS WELL-KNOWN ARTISTS.

BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ
Despite the standard art-history-book summary of Mexican modernism, there actually is much more to this colorful subject than the works, emblematic though they might be, of Los Tres Grandes (The Three Great Ones)—Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco. Their epoch-defining murals painted in the decades following the 1910–20 revolution that ousted the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz gave enduring expression to a proud people's still-emerging sense of national identity. In the 1920s they began painting the large-scale murals in schools and government buildings that would become indelibly associated with their names and with uniquely Mexican interpretations of such seminal European modernist movements as Post-Impressionism and Cubism.

With the fall of the Díaz regime, which had suppressed civil rights and allowed wealthy landowners and industrialists to exploit struggling laborers, a new administration put forth a reformist agenda. José Vasconcelos, the federal government’s public education secretary in the early 1920s, supported public art projects like those of the muralists to educate the masses about Mexico’s history and to foster a sense of modern Mexican national identity based on democratic values. Rivera, a member of the Mexican Communist Party, and Siqueiros, a Marxist who helped establish an artists’ union in 1923, imbued their murals with a social-spirit. Their political agendas could be detected in their handling of such subject matter as the Spanish conquest of their homeland’s indigenous peoples and the complex history of the Mexican Revolution. The public works they—along with Orozco and several other artists—created well into the late 1940s and ’50s became known collectively as the “Mexican Mural Renaissance.”

Nationalistic in spirit and propagandistic in purpose, the muralists’ grand creations were supported by the state. With such backing, the attitude and the technical character of their works came to define for foreign viewers, and to dictate to their fellow artmakers at home, just what Mexican modern art should look like, the subjects it should address and what it should say. There was a stylized social realism—not to be confused with Soviet-style socialist realism—with little room for abstraction.

Of course, Mexican artists also produced works influenced by Symbolism, Surrealism and other styles and movements. Artists like Frida Kahlo, Rivera’s wife, developed deeply personal modes of image making. Still, the heroic murals cast a long shadow—even over the muralists’ other works. Today, oil paintings, watercolors and drawings by Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco have become pricey and rare. Like Kahlo’s paintings, which have enjoyed a boom in the market and earned a feminist-mystical place in the pop-culture arena,
they lure ever-higher bids at auction when they do turn up. But there are other Mexican artists whose works deserve critical attention and who also contributed to modernism’s distinctive inflections in Mexico in the 20th century. “Ángel Zárraga, Alfonso Michel, María Izquierdo, Alfredo Ramos Martínez—these are just a few of the notewor-
dy Mexican modernists who were known in their time but who later fell into relative oblivion,” says the Mexico City-based businessman and collector Andrés Blaisten, whose respected Blaisten Collection of many hundreds of paintings, sculptures and works on paper is consid-
ered the most valuable holding of Mexican modernist art anywhere in private hands. He adds, “Unlike Rivera and venerable galleries. Founded nearly 75 years ago by Pérez Amor’s aunt, Carolina Amor, and run by her late mother, the legendary dealer Inés Amor, “GAM,” as the gallery is known, has represented or handled the work of just about every major Mexican modernist. Among them are Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco, Rufino Tamayo, the landscape painter Gerardo Murillo (who was known as “Dr. Atl”), photographer Tina Modotti and the Guatemalan-born painter-
muralist Carlos Mérida, who moved to Mexico in 1919 and went on to earn a lasting place in his adopted country’s modernist canon. “Blaisten is motivated by his love of the works he acquires,” says Pérez Amor, “but an unmistakable side effect of seriously going after works others have overlooked and bringing them into a distinguished collection is that their market values may increase, even as their aesthetic worth is more deeply appreciated.” Blaisten points to the works of Izquierdo (1902–55), who brought Surrealist in/f_luences into her art after meeting the French playwright, poet and theater director Antonin Artaud in Mexico City in the 1930s. With their broad, brushy passages of thick color and sometimes-unusual perspectives, Izquierdo’s still lifes and seemingly ordinary scenes can seem charged with restless energy. Blaisten, who argues that Frida Kahlo’s work has probably become famous more because of its creator’s notorious personality than for its inherent aesthetic qualities, believes Izquierdo, although still largely overlooked, “is really the most impor-
tant female painter among the Mexican modernists.” In fact, a catalogue that has been published to document a portion of the collector’s considerable holdings points out that, as a female artist, Izquierdo “suffered” because of the “monopoly” the “Three Great Ones” had on government-spon-
sored mural projects. The book notes that Rivera and Siqueiros “blocked her efforts to paint murals in Mexico City.” Be that as it may, when Izquierdo was a student there in the late 1920s, Rivera himself had lauded her work, and in 1930 she became the /f_irst female Mexican artist to pres-
t a solo exhibition in New York. Later, Izquierdo would observe that she had sidestepped overtly political themes because they did not “have expressive or poetic strength.” Other artists featured in Blaisten’s collection include Zárraga (1886–1946), whose 1909 oil-on-canvas The Woman and the Puppet offers a dark stirring of Symbol-
ism’s literary-theatrical airs. In the picture, Zárraga, who came from a well-to-do family and studied and showed his work in Europe in the early 1900s, depicts a nude young woman sporting only jewelry and a mantilla around her neck and, attached to strings she can manipulate, a grimac-
ing, man-marionette in garish makeup—the aristocratic lover she has seduced and dominated, wearing a costume that symbolizes his humiliation. Mérida’s 1919 oil-on-canvas Mayor of Almolonga presents a vivid example of
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