

O R O Z C O

BY JOSEPH PIJOAN

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Incredibly, he needed only one hand — this great painter of the Western Hemisphere — for the Promethean task of painting the most powerful and significant murals of modern times.

Yes! . . . he was here! He was with us! He worked for us. He left in these United States some of his best products. He painted large frescoes which are now our nation's property — over 300 square yards of great masterpieces. And what did we give him in exchange? You will blush. Look at the sum of what we gave him in dollars and cents; it does not reach five figures.

In Pomona, California, he had to paint a gigantic wall in two months. At Dartmouth he availed himself of a wall in a cellar with low ceiling; in New York, scattered panels in a modern school. Never in the U.S. did Orozco have the recognition as the greatest artist of his time. And indeed he was, this man, the Mexican, who, born in a small Mexican village and art-and-life-educated in the pulquerias, the cheap saloons where peasants and derelicts drown their frustrations and poverty in tequila, lived to become the greatest painter of human struggle and aspiration since Goya.

Orozco, perched high on a scaffold with paints, brushes, trowel, and other paraphernalia spread out on the trestle beside him — or on the ground — was a man of extraordinary dexterity. Whatever he set his single hand to — whether it was tying his shoelaces, or painting in the difficult medium of true fresco on vast walls or painting in the tremendous arched vaults of high-domed ceilings — he could do more expertly and often more swiftly than most people, including artists, who are equipped with the full complement of hands.

He was always immaculate either in the white canvas coverall he wore when painting, or in his well-tailored blue serge. His dark, fine-textured wavy hair was always neatly brushed; a healthy color glowed through the even tan of his face, accented by a small clipped mustache.

His chief characteristic seemed to be an intense quietness. It was as though, except for the brief

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GENTILY
Autumn, 1953
p. 35

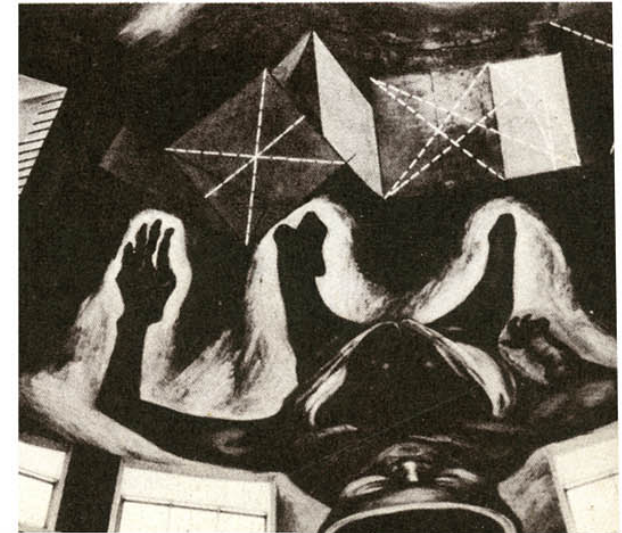
TAIL FROM THE AUDITORIUM, GUADALAJARA



WOMAN—DRAWING



DETAIL FROM THE AUDITORIUM, GUADALAJARA



amenities of social intercourse, he had said all he intended to say ever. Yet he did not appear withdrawn, subdued, or repressed, only intently quiet. Like a banked fire that does not waste its light and heat in ordinary household use, he simply held in reserve his great power to blaze forth on mighty walls his prophetic perceptions.

Orozco was born November 23, 1883, in the state of Jalisco. Two years later the family moved to Guadalajara, which always remained Orozco's spiritual home as it was the home of both his paternal and maternal Spanish ancestors, for Orozco was purely Spanish. When he was seven the family moved to Mexico City. On his way to and from primary school, the small Clemente watched through the window of a printing shop the great Mexican caricaturist, Posada, at work. Orozco has said this was his first stimulus toward art.

Not long after discovering Posada, the embryo artist learned that night classes in drawing were held in the nearby San Carlos Academy of Fine Arts. He thereupon presented himself for enrollment. But these were adult classes and the idea of a seven-year-old child being admitted to them seemed ridiculous to the authorities. But, strongly fortified by his mother who insisted that the San Carlos faculty compare her infant's draughtsmanship with that of the adults in the classes, Mexico's future immortal won out. Thereafter, nearly every evening, the young boy marched off to class in the venerable Academy.

When he was fourteen, Orozco's family sent him for three years to the School of Agriculture at San Jacinto. But he did not want to be a farmer. He returned to Mexico City to spend four years at the National Preparatory School where he became noted for his skill in mathematics. But he still wanted to be an artist. He attended night painting classes at the Academy, supporting himself, after his father died, by working as a draughtsman in an architectural office and, later, as a newspaper illustrator.

His pulqueria paintings early showed the power of his insight. The pulquerias were the antechambers of the brothels and jails. They were laboratories of humanity. Among the dregs of society were raw feeling and emotional honesty. To Orozco the well-heeled represented the only vice essentially criminal — the loss of humanity.

Early in his youth Orozco lost his left hand in an accidental explosion, and when the Mexican Revolution started in 1909 he did his fighting with his art. Like Leonardo, he observed long and carefully, seeking the human motives and expressions in the acts by which men articulate the tragedy of existence. He saw the peasants marching with long strides to face the muskets of an oppressing army. He saw the wives following their fighting husbands, wives nursing their infants while dragging behind their few household possessions. He saw the mass executions of the peasants, each jumping in his individual way after

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MAN OF FIRE — Fresco at Guadalajara Orphanage which for Orozco symbolized the turbulence of our times



SCENES OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION FROM THE MURAL IN THE PALACIO DE BELLAS ARTES, MEXICO CITY



SELF PORTRAIT

Orozco felt deep amusement in the legends, some of them ridiculous and most of them without a grain of truth, that quickly began to grow up around him. In the rather brief Autobiography published in a Mexican newspaper two years before his death, he wrote:

I DID NOT take any part in the Revolution. Nothing bad happened to me and I did not risk danger of any kind. I knew the great chiefs only by sight, when they would pass through the streets at the head of their troops. Because of this, the numerous articles that appeared in the American press concerning my wartime achievements seemed very comical. The heading of a San Francisco newspaper read: *The bare-footed soldier of the Revolution*. Another related, with minute details, my differences with Carranza, who persecuted me implacably because of my attacks! Still another dramatized the loss of my left hand, picturing me flinging bombs in a terrible combat between Villistas and Zapatistas, when the truth is that I lost the hand when I was very young, playing with gunpowder, an accident like any other.

Unfortunately, the legend with the least truth, in fact with no truth in it at all, persists to this day — the fantastic claim that Orozco was or had ever been a Communist. Communism was in complete opposition to Orozco's nature. He was above all an individualist. He claimed that right for himself and desired it for every other human being. He had a profound and compassionate love of humanity, but little faith in human nature, especially as expressed in political or organizational activity. His deep distrust of organizations was founded on bitter personal experience, and for that reason, as well as because of his nature, he was never a joiner. With his fierce individualism he was always at odds with mass movements, the mob mind, and the assumption of authority. The double-edged blade of his brilliantly savage caricatures slashed like a machete right and left. He was neither pro- nor anti-Communist. He was pro-humanity, and through the powerful medium of his art struck out relentlessly against any force — greed, cruelty, lust, superstition, regimentation — that exploited, enslaved, or injured mankind.

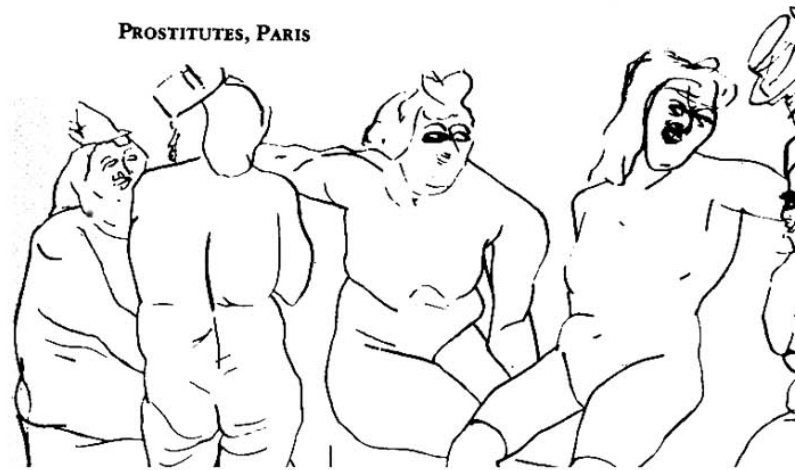
being struck by the lethal bullet. He saw the plunder, the rape, the murder—inevitable accompaniments of civil war.

Orozco made paintings and lithographs of these scenes, and the works had the strength, the incision, the stark drama of Goya's *Disasters of War*. Orozco, in fact, is the only successor to Goya, and an artist of the same stature and genius. He shares with Goya the same power of draughtsmanship, the same economy of means to achieve impact, and the same understanding of emotion. Like him, Orozco can effect biting caricature without sacrificing the humanity which makes an art a true criticism of life.

Vasconcelos, the Minister of Education in the cabinet of Mexico's first stable, post-revolutionary government, picked Orozco to commemorate in art the essence and lasting values of the democratic victory. In the cloisters of the patio of the capital's chief high school, Orozco painted frescoes that are the most significant art works of the city. He worked without plan, painting what he felt and thought spontaneously and while surrounded by the crowds of people who daily surged through the area.

What did he paint? Indians, landlords, soldiers, potentates; mothers, children, Franciscan friars, barricades. One series of panels traces the sequence of the revolution. We see the struggle at the barricades, the dead peons, and, finally, the shattered idols, fallen domes, ruined palaces, and a young, nude mother embracing a child who will inherit the hope that is still to be translated into tangible form. Yet there is no fanaticism in Orozco's vision; Franciscan friars appear among the peons, one embracing a tubercular Indian, another bending to feed a leper. For Orozco was sensitive to the human spirit wherever it was to be found; to him evil could be corrected by meekness as well as struggle, and the Franciscans, in Orozco's eyes, were symbols of the gentleness and humanity which asserted itself even amid the cruelty and oppression of the conquistadores. These are unforgettable figures. Orozco, despite his passionate indictment of social evil, never became a pessimist nor a misanthrope; he never withdrew from contact with living issues, with life in its turbulence and realities. Nature at times is cancerous and demands surgery; at other times it calls for total service in the

PROSTITUTES, PARIS



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much we can afford." Orozco replied, "I don't mean how much money. I mean how many square yards." When he learned that there were a hundred square yards of wall space to be frescoed, he came immediately — without any question about payment.

When Orozco arrived in Pomona he looked at the wall. "Any restrictions?" he asked. There were none. With scarcely any preparation, the Mexican went to work. He began the now famous Prometheus mural — Prometheus carrying the fire stolen from heaven. The hands of the giant are burnt, and he crouches kneeling to sustain the weight of the load. The forbidden fire — bought with heroic anguish — is passed on to men, but the prize is unequally shared; some men perceive more light and are susceptible to more heat than others, and they, in the fresco, are represented with the distinct shaping and color which accompanies a highly individualized soul. The men who are apathetic and cold remain amorphous. The warm humans Orozco individualized; the stolid he painted as abstract, geometric figures whose parallel motions repeat the same pattern.

Orozco worked at Pomona with volcanic passion. He was in the dining hall early each morning, giving instructions to the mason. He painted a full square yard or more each day. He worked from no sketch, not even a rough outline of a general plan. He was bursting, not composing.

Some students were asked, one day, if they liked Orozco's fresco. "I don't know," one answered, "but of this I am sure: I wish that whatever I might do in life could be done with the energy and faith with which that man is painting."

When the Pomona mural was completed, Orozco was invited to work at Dartmouth. There was a professorship vacant there, and Orozco was offered it with unusual conditions: he was to paint, not lecture. Orozco accepted; and there, in Hanover, N. H., in the center of an active

academic life, he painted an incisive manifesto of social criticism — a bitter commentary on the consequences of the kind of liberation he had symbolized in the Prometheus fresco. In the Dartmouth frieze Christ chops down his cross with an axe. Quetzalcoatl, the mythical civilizer who taught the Toltecs the essence of arts and crafts, is shown abandoning in anger the people who have not benefited from his teachings. As for the entire white race, the mural seems to ask, What is it doing? The answer is supplied in the last panel of the mural. Here a symposium of bespectacled professors is debating over a skeleton — bones without spirit.

In the New School for Social Research in New York, Orozco painted a group of powerful allusions to the chaos of modern political life. These murals are now the object of contemporary criticism, chiefly because they include a portrait of Lenin. The central painting in this group features a great table of brotherhood around which sit eleven men representing the Earth's races. The protagonist is the table — a large rectangular surface without inkstands, protocol articles, or agenda. The feeling conveyed by the composition is that joining all races, all peoples, is a common purpose, a unanimity of spirit. The quiet figure of Gandhi, strategically placed near the lower foreground of one of the murals, is one of the memorable details the spectator takes away.

The New School murals are shocking in their simplicity, in the subtlety of their irony. In some panels you will feel disgust at seeing your own face unmasked; you will be shocked by the bareness of the flat top table — a quadrangle offering no doctrines, no emblems, not even a dove of peace. All it features are human beings associated for a silent meeting.

When Orozco returned to Mexico he left in this country examples of laborious and selfless expression which

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Left:
PROMETHEUS
AT
POMONA
Right:
WOMEN

OROZCO . . . continued

have benefited many ambitious young American fresco painters, particularly those whose opportunities were supplied by the works programs of the New Deal. Unfortunately, most of these were able to borrow only Orozco's subject matter — not the vigor, nor the dramatic sweep of conception, nor abundance of form.

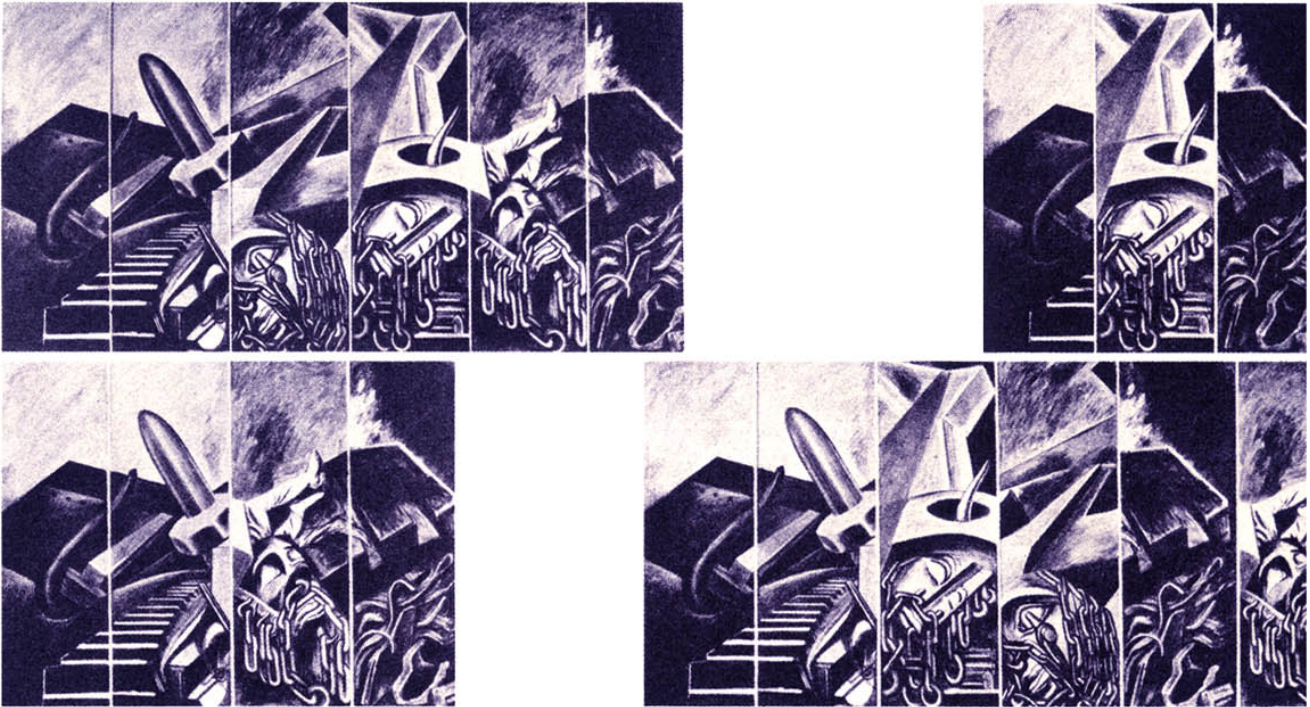
His return was followed by a great period of work. Orozco painted the walls of Mexico's Supreme Court, the staircase of the Governor's Palace at Guadalajara, the walls at the University and of a chapel in a hospital founded during Mexico's colonial period. In many of these murals Orozco introduced incisive pictorial themes. On the landing of the staircase of the Supreme Court, for example, he painted a scene of revolution in which the leaders of both the Right and the Left are pierced by swords, leaving the populace leaderless and in disorder. This is a monumental *j'accuse*, directed ironically at the palace of supreme legal authority in which it stands.

In most universities the arts and sciences are pictured symbolically; half-nude ladies, who declare themselves to be Muses, are shown lackadaisically holding up some symbol which identifies them with biology, music, astronomy, or whatever art or science seems appropriate to the moment. Orozco cut through this conventional haze of misrepresentation. He substituted action for cliché sym-

bolism. Each department of study was portrayed by the human behavior from which it draws its meaning and value. And, on the vaulted ceilings, he painted his representational figures interlocked, for human activities are always dependent on one another, and no discipline can really stand in isolation from others.

Three years ago Orozco was busily painting the walls of another church. What he was painting — whether social criticism, apocalypse, or revelation — can never be known. He died before his work took recognizable form; and there, in the midst of his final project, his body lies. It was typical of Orozco that the last day he worked was the last day he lived. In the afternoon of September 6, 1949, half finished with the first nearly abstract mural he had ever attempted, he laid down his brushes. He was a meteor which orbited across the Rio Grande, leaving a vision where it coursed. Our sky still glows with its color.

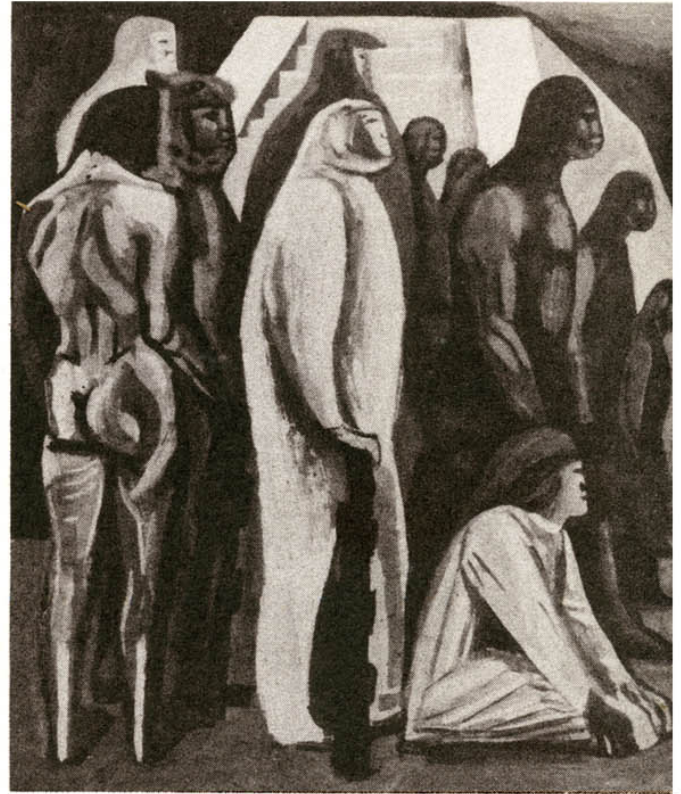
The government officially proclaimed him one of Mexico's Immortals and he was buried with full state honors. His beautiful Guadalajara studio, four stories high, is now a national monument, and a museum is being built in Mexico City to house his collected paintings. But his real monument for a thousand years to come will be the great frescoes he painted for the people — in these United States and on the walls of Mexico.



Orozco returned to New York for a few weeks in 1940 to paint a portable fresco, weighing half a ton, commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art. It is composed of six movable panels or steel frames, each 9 by 3 feet, in which the plaster is held by wire mesh. On this six-part surface Orozco painted, in true fresco, "The Dive Bomber," a massed wreck of machinery with the legs of the aviator sticking up out of it. One of the most fascinating and sardonic features of the mural is that the panels can be placed together in any order and either upside down or straight side up; and the resulting composition is still what the artist intended it to be — the destruction of man by the machine he has created. For who can say what is the top or the bottom, the left or the right, of a wreck?

He came to the United States matured in this world-view. He was not stuffed with the art dogmas of the Beaux Arts. He was a product of the university of struggle; he was of the world and nature. His subject matter was human action in its full dynamic range, not the contrived approaches of schools of esthetics. His primary concern was always what he had to say, not the way he was to say it, nor the advantage it might bring him.

One incident will make this clear. When Orozco was proposed as the muralist for the extensive end wall of the dining hall at Pomona College, in California, a telegram was sent him asking if he were available for the job. Orozco wired back the single word, *Quanto?* which means in Spanish both *how much?* and *how many?* The reply was interpreted as meaning *how much?* and the Pomona authorities wired back, "We don't know yet how
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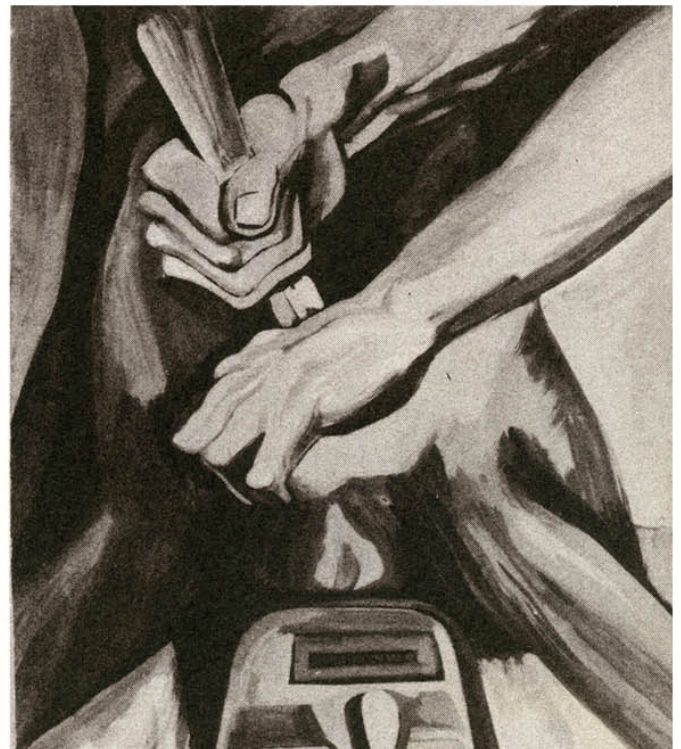


FRESCO AT DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

Crossing the border on his first visit to the United States, the customs inspector at Laredo, Texas tore up half of the 120 paintings as too "immoral" for entrance into this country. Orozco writes of this incident:

The pictures were very far from being immoral, having nothing of impudence, and were not even nudes, but the officials clung to the belief that they had complied with their duty in preventing the besmirchment of North American purity and chastity—or perhaps they thought that there was already too much lust inside their borders to increase it from without.

PROSTITUTES, MEXICO



OROZCO . . . continued

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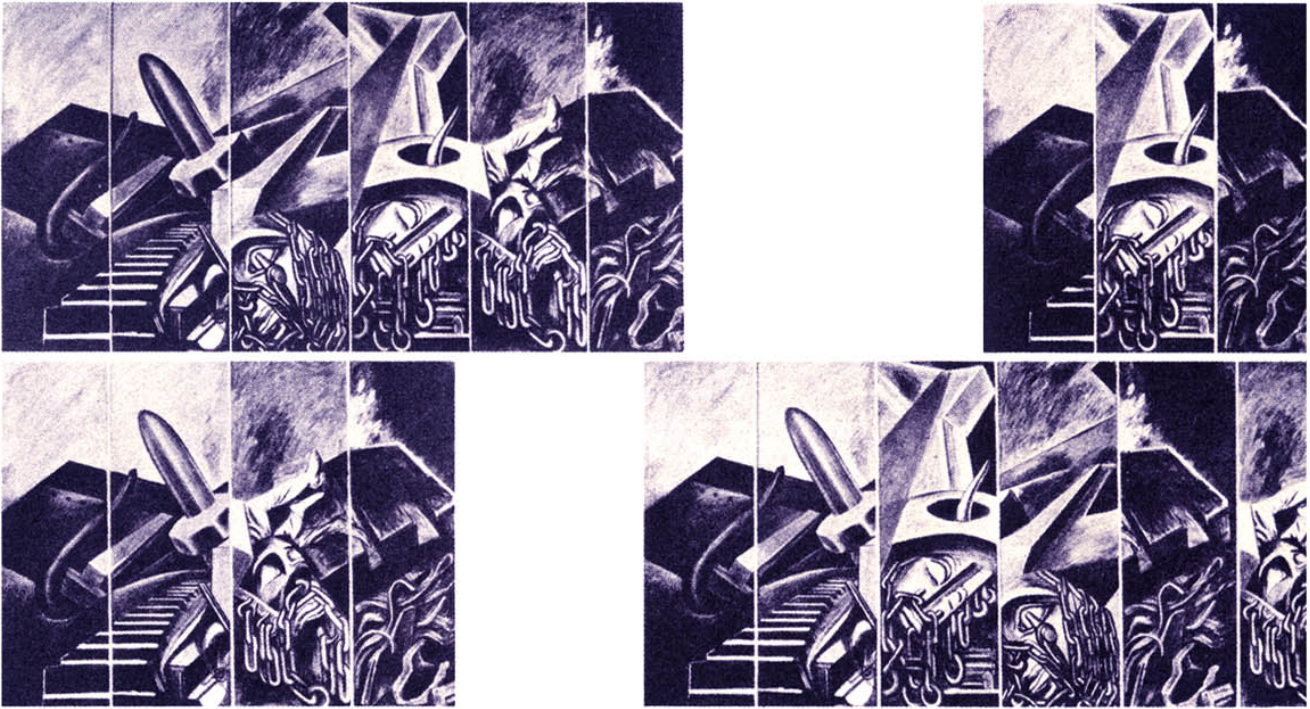
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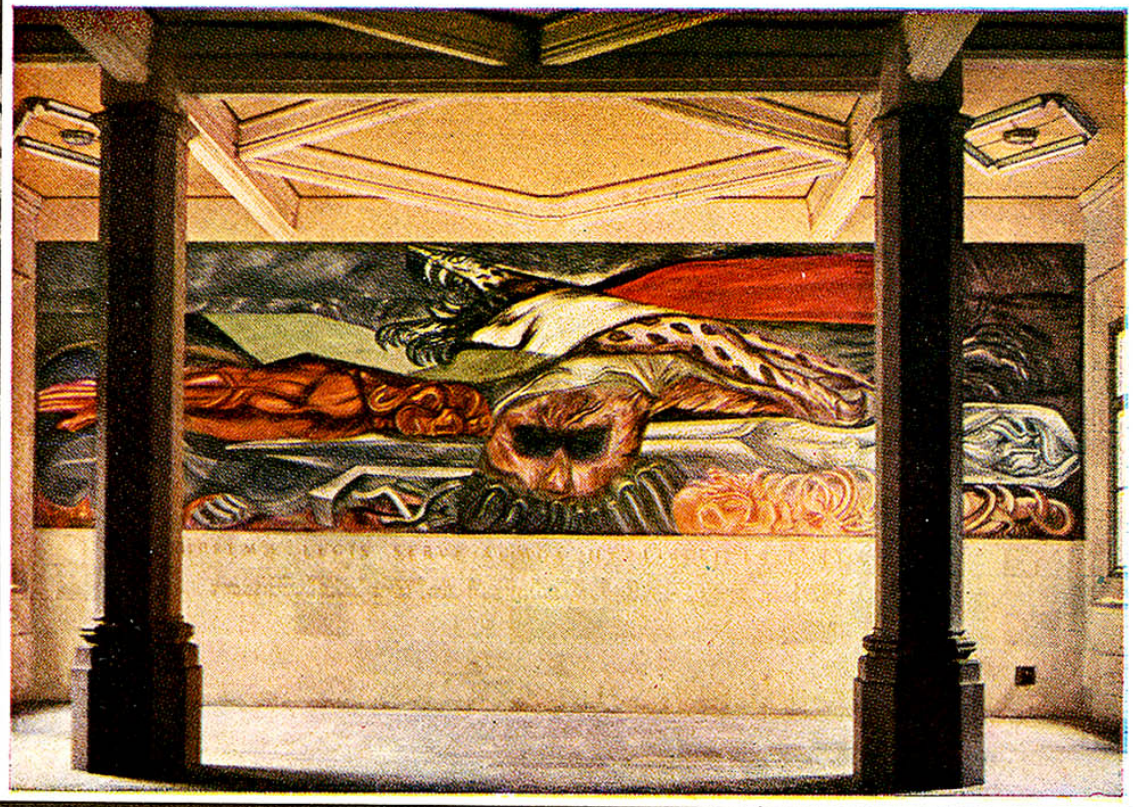
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MURALS IN THE PALACIO DE JUSTICIA, MEXICO CITY

DEPICTING THE REVOLUTION AND ITS GOAL OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

