A Visitor's Guide to The Epic of American Civilization

The Epic of American Civilization represents the most ambitious public work undertaken by the renowned Mexican muralist during his years in the United States. Despite its "epic" title, Orozco conceived of the mural not as a narrative but as a work structured around an "American idea," specifically a representation of a continent characterized by the duality of indigenous and European historical experiences. He used the reserve reading room's symmetrical west and east wings—devoted to pre-Hispanic and post-conquest civilizations, respectively—to create historical and cross-cultural parallels and to suggest the cyclical nature of human conflict, self-sacrifice, and regeneration.
1. Machine: The mural is divided into a thematic and stylistic exploration of the late sixteenth century and the European conquest of the Americas. The machine metaphor is used as an allegory for the destruction wrought by Cortez's conquest. The machine is shown as a flayed body, a metaphor for the exploitation of indigenous labor and resources.

2. Cortez and the Cross: This panel represents the concept of contemporary mechanical society. The figure of Cortez, dressed in academic garb, stands at the center of the mural, presiding over a mechanical society. The foreground features a group of machine totems, including a factory, a school, a hospital, and a church, symbolizing the modern world.

3. Modern Human Sacrifice: The mural's final panels appear directly across from the central room, creating a thematic link between the two ages of civilization. The mural's climax is a defiant, resurrected Christ, symbolizing the redemption of humanity.

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7. Departure of Quetzalcoatl: Drawing on Mesoamerican thought, Orozco depicts several scenes of the former gods—representing the human tendency to feed on the human bodies piled at Cortez's feet in the adjacent panel, connecting his destructive imperialist project to the sacrificial cycle of the modern era. The small panel over the door of the east wing represents the concept of contemporary mechanical society.

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