

A Closer Look



Step 4: Interpretation

Interpretation involves bringing together your close observation, analysis, and any additional information you have gathered about a work of art to try to understand what it means.

There can be multiple interpretations of a work of art. The best-informed ones are based on visual evidence and accurate research.

One interpretive question to consider for this painting might be:

What do you think Orozco was trying to say to or about institutions of higher learning with this panel?

Step 5: Critical Assessment and Response

This final stage involves a judgment of the success of a work of art. Critical assessment deals with questions of value, and can include more personal and subjective responses to art. Critical assessment can also change over time.

Today, this work of art is considered one of the strongest examples of public art on a college campus. However, when Orozco's mural was completed, some members of the Dartmouth community were outraged and felt this image was inappropriate for the new College reading room. Others suggested that it was an important reminder to students and faculty to remain connected to the concerns of the world despite their privileged position at the College.

Does this image represent issues that are still relevant today?

Overall, do you think this painting is successful and well done? Why or why not?

Do you like it? Does it move you?

We hope this approach has enhanced your exploration and enjoyment of this painting. If you like, you can try this method with other works of art. Simply ask yourself with each work:

What do I see?
(Close Observation)

What do I think?
(Analysis)

How can I learn more?
(Research)

What might it mean?
(Interpretation)

How do I feel about it?
(Critical Assessment and Response)

This brochure was written by Vivian Ladd, Museum Educator, working with text written by various authors for the Hood Museum of Art.

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**HOOD
MUSEUM
OF ART**

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José Clemente Orozco, Mexican,
1883–1949

Gods of the Modern World
from *The Epic of American
Civilization*

1932–34

Fresco

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José Clemente Orozco was one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. He first engaged in formal art studies at the San Carlos Academy in Mexico City, where he came into contact with major figures in the Mexican mural renaissance of the first decades of the century. Orozco began his career as a political caricaturist. Upon his (second) visit to the United States at the age of forty-three, he had become a public mural painter and was recognized as one of the leading artists within the mural movement fostered by the Mexican government following that country's revolution (1910–17).

In 1927, pessimistic about prospects for future Mexican commissions and drawn by growing U.S. interest in Mexican art and culture, Orozco became the first of the Mexican muralists to journey north in search of international audiences and recognition. He stayed in the United States for seven years, using New York as his home base, and began one of the most significant and productive periods of his career. While he continued to paint, exhibit, and sell works that focused on the Mexican Revolution and landscape, U.S. culture had a deep impact on his work and inspired him to explore new urban themes, modern artistic forms, and printmaking.

In early 1932, Orozco received an invitation from the Dartmouth College art department faculty to visit the campus and demonstrate the “true art of mural painting.” The creation of a true fresco (an Italian word meaning “fresh”) is a time-consuming, technically demanding, and highly complex

process in which the artist paints directly onto a layer of specially prepared wet plaster. Orozco painted a small fresco, entitled *Man Released from the Mechanistic to the Creative Life*, in a corridor just off the north end of the Orozco room that leads to Carpenter Hall. While preparing for that fresco, Orozco first saw the vast, empty walls of the library's reserve reading room and proposed to paint an extensive mural cycle devoted to the commonalities of American civilizations past and present and their potential for spiritual renewal. Paid through a special teaching fund donated by the Rockefeller family, Orozco began the mural in spring 1932.

In the panel called *Gods of the Modern World*, Orozco portrays skeletons dressed in academic garb presiding over the birth of useless knowledge. It is a powerful condemnation of the institution of higher education and its indifference to the political turmoil of the 1930s. The academics turn their backs on the burning issues of contemporary life while they focus on their intellectual world. Their institution gives birth to a new graduate, a skeletal fetus wearing a mortarboard, and previous graduates in the form of embalmed fetuses rest on dusty tomes. All of this suggests the academy's futile dissemination of useless knowledge.

Local and national public response to the mural cycle was mixed even before its completion in February 1934. Though it received great acclaim from contemporary social critics, nationalistic commentators voiced sharp criticism of Orozco's status as a foreign artist receiving public commissions in the United States. They also took issue with the mural's indigenous subject matter and its critical perspective on a variety of American institutions. Vigorously defended by the College's president, Ernest Hopkins, on the grounds of educational value and freedom of expression, the fresco continued to inspire debate but soon garnered widespread recognition as a significant artistic accomplishment.

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

NUMBER SIX IN A SERIES

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The Hood Museum of Art is a teaching museum. Our mission is to create an ideal learning environment that fosters transformative encounters with works of art. One way we do this is through a method called **Learning to Look**. This five-step approach to exploring works of art is designed to empower visitors to observe carefully and think critically about any work of art.

Simply follow the steps below to practice this technique.

Step 1: Close Observation

Look carefully at this panel of José Clemente Orozco's mural *The Epic of American Civilization*.

What do you see?



Consider the action taking place in the center of the panel.



What do you notice about the reclining skeleton? Its pose? Its head? The bed it is lying upon?

Notice the robed skeleton on the left and the tiny skeleton in its hands. What is their role in this scene?



Now focus on the figures looking on. How are each of these skeletons dressed? How are they the same? How are they different?



Observe the background. What is happening behind the figures?



What do you notice in the panel below the reclining skeleton? What is inside the specimen jars?

How would you describe Orozco's painting style? His lines? Colors? Brushstrokes?

How has he composed this panel around the architectural details of the room?

Step 2: Analysis

Now think about all of this visual information.

What do you think is happening in this scene?

Why are all the figures skeletons? What might skeletons symbolize?

Whom might the skeletons in the background represent?

How are they responding to the world in flames behind them?

Why has the skeleton giving birth been placed on a pile of books?

What sort of child is the skeleton giving birth to? Why is it wearing a mortarboard? What might be the significance of the other small skeletons wearing mortarboards in the jars?

As you consider each of these questions, look to the mural for clues to support your ideas.

Step 3: Research

Now that you have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming your own ideas about this work of art, feel free to read the text printed on the back of this brochure. It provides information you cannot get simply by looking at this panel of the mural.

When you have finished reading, consider the following:

Does this information reinforce what you observed and deduced on your own?

Did the text mention anything you did not see or think about previously? If so, what?

How would your experience of this painting have been different if you read the background information first?