



OROZCO AT DARTMOUTH

The Epic of American Civilization

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This brochure was made possible by the Manton Foundation, whose generosity provides perpetual support for the preservation of the Orozco murals. The original printing was sponsored by Monroe Denton, Class of 1968.

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Mural images from José Clemente Orozco's *The Epic of American Civilization*, 1932–34, fresco, Orozco Room, Baker Library, Dartmouth College. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College. Photographs of the mural in progress courtesy of Dartmouth College Libraries. Continuous scan of mural used on front cover and center spreads by Hany Farid. Diagram on center spread by Barbara Krieger.

For images of Orozco's preparatory drawings for the mural, please see the web resource Dartmouth Digital Orozco at <http://www.dartmouth.edu/digitalorozco/>, which was produced in collaboration with the Neukom Institute for Computational Science and funded by the Class of 1960, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Neukom Institute.

Back cover: The muralist's tools; Orozco on scaffold with *Man Released from the Mechanistic to the Creative Life*, May 1932

Preface

The Epic of American Civilization by José Clemente Orozco is one of Dartmouth's greatest treasures. Painted between 1932 and 1934, the mural features provocative themes and haunting imagery that continue to resonate with audiences today.

The early 1930s was a burgeoning era for art on the Dartmouth campus. In her essay, art historian Jacquelyn Baas reminds us of the ambitions of art history professors Artemas S. Packard and Churchill P. Lathrop, who originated the commission with the support of President Ernest Hopkins. This landmark commission would be, they surmised, the first in a series of regular engagements with "the most competent artists available." Orozco, Hopkins, Lathrop, and Packard could not have envisaged how their advocacy for transformative art at Dartmouth would eventually manifest itself. Seventy-five years later, *The Epic of American Civilization* remains one of very few works commissioned for Dartmouth, yet the influence it has had on countless artists and scholars, students and faculty, and visitors from all parts of the globe is nothing short of remarkable.

Packard and Lathrop were equally concerned that students wishing to learn about an artist's studio activities had no resource for academic support, although Carpenter Hall, home of the Art History Department since 1929, was outfitted with drawing, painting, sculpting, and printmaking studios in addition to seven art exhibition galleries. They proposed to President Hopkins that an artist be brought to Dartmouth to add academic richness to students' "extra-curricular" interest in art making. Carlos Sanchez '23 thus became the first artist-in-residence at Dartmouth College, followed the

next year by José Clemente Orozco. Decades later, the artist-in-residence program, now administered by the Studio Art Department, has brought nearly 150 artists to teach and work at Dartmouth, including Paul Sample, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, Donald Judd, and more recently William Christenberry, Terry Adkins, Amy Sillman, Alison Saar, Jane Hammond, and Sana Musasama. All of these artists and their students have no doubt spent time, together and alone, contemplating the narrative, iconography, and sheer mastery of technique that Orozco demonstrated in his great murals.

In 1936, a couple of years after Orozco had departed the Hanover Plain for his native Mexico, another artist traveled three hundred miles to stand before his Dartmouth masterpiece. According to the 1989 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, Jackson Pollock—with a group that included fellow artist Philip Goldstein (later Philip Guston)—drove from New York to see Orozco's mural. Pollock subsequently painted an untitled sketch now known as *Bald Woman with Skeleton* (right), which was recently acquired by the Hood Museum of Art. Pollock, like many artists then, now, and surely still to come, was moved to create something new from his experience with this powerful work of modern art.

In addition to inspiring new acquisitions for the Hood's permanent collection, the murals have set a lasting tone for the exhibition program as well. In any given year, there are several projects on campus dedicated to socially engaged art. Dartmouth has long been an institution that welcomes diverse opinions and the free and open exchange of ideas. It was this vibrant intellectual environment that originally led to the creation of Orozco's murals, and that

inspires artists, scholars, and curators to continue sharing his vision with the world. The very presence of Orozco's *Epic of American Civilization* informs the day-to-day life of those who live on campus and influences the scholarship of many of those who work here.

We can only hope that Professors Packard and Lathrop would be satisfied that their vision for art at Dartmouth has sparked the imagination and creativity of generations to follow, and has made Dartmouth a vibrant community for artists, scholars, and art lovers.

We are most grateful to the Manton Foundation, whose generosity provides perpetual support for the preservation and interpretation of the Orozco mural, which includes this important brochure.

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Jackson Pollock, untitled
(*Bald Woman with Skeleton*),
about 1938–41, oil on the
smooth side of Masonite
attached to the stretcher.
Purchased through the
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Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel.





Dartmouth College and *The Epic of American Civilization*

JACQUELYNN BAAS

In 1768 the founder of Dartmouth College, the Reverend Eleazar Wheelock, sent “a small specimen of the produce and manufacture of the American wilderness”—a pipe, tobacco pouch, knife case, and several other articles—to the College’s benefactor, the Second Earl of Dartmouth.¹ From its very beginnings, Dartmouth’s remote location in the New England wilderness fostered an active commitment to providing examples of the “natural and moral world,” as museum and library collections were thought of in the eighteenth century. One of the most notable manifestations of this ongoing commitment is *The Epic of American Civilization*, the mural that, in the spring of 1932, the Mexican artist José Clemente Orozco was commissioned to paint in the lower-level reserve reading room of Dartmouth’s Baker Library.

The Epic of American Civilization proved to be a pivotal work in the career of one of the most significant artists of the twentieth century. Many of the students who witnessed its creation never forgot the experience, and its impact is still palpable seventy-five years later. To understand how this inflammatory work by a Mexican artist came to be created at Dartmouth College during the depths of the Great Depression is to understand something both about Dartmouth and about Wheelock’s successors as stewards of student cultural life.

Commissioning Orozco

The idea of bringing Orozco to Dartmouth to execute a mural seems to have occurred to members of the art faculty around the time their new building, Carpenter Hall, was completed in 1929. The following year, the department’s chairman, Artemas S. Packard, supported by a young member of the art faculty, Churchill P. Lathrop, began a campaign to realize their vision of obtaining for the College the services of one of the two important Mexican muralists then working in the United States: Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. According to Lathrop, Orozco was their preferred choice from the beginning.² But they were quite aware that the gregarious Rivera had better name recognition, so Packard and Lathrop organized several exhibitions of Orozco’s prints and drawings in the galleries of Carpenter Hall in order to make his work better known in northern New England.

The persistence of Orozco’s New York dealer, Alma Reed, was an important factor that may have helped offset a tendency to favor Rivera among potential supporters of bringing a Mexican muralist to Dartmouth. Chief among these was the Rockefeller family, with their Mexican oil interests. Nelson Rockefeller, Dartmouth Class of 1930, had been a student of Lathrop’s, and a tutorial fund for special educational initiatives set up by Nelson’s mother, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, would ultimately make the commission possible.

From 1930 to 1931, Orozco was working on murals for the New School for Social Research

Orozco on scaffold with *Departure of Quetzalcoatl*, June 1932 (detail)

in Manhattan. Alma Reed informed Packard that Orozco was eager to return to a classical theme, like that of the *Prometheus* mural he recently had created for Pomona College. On February 20, 1931, Reed wrote Packard that what Orozco had in mind for Dartmouth was something “he calls the New World epic painting—taking great traditional themes, such as the Prometheus, and giving them a meaning for today.” On May 22, Packard reassured Reed that members of the Art Department had been thinking about this project and how it might be accomplished, and that “some of us are predisposed in favor of Señor Orozco.”

Progress was slow, however, because Packard was not making much headway with fundraising for an Art Department mural. In a letter to Mrs. Rockefeller of August 8, 1931, he used her suggestion of Rivera as a pretext for proposing an even more ambitious plan: “I am more than a little excited by your suggestion of Rivera, who, without any doubt, is a greater all-round painter than Orozco. . . . Would it not be eminently worth while to think of a continuous series of mural paintings being executed at Dartmouth at intervals of three to five years during the next fifty or a hundred years by the most competent artists available so that in the course of time we should have in this one place a sequence of original works such as no institution of our day possesses? . . . I am of the opinion that it would not require a very large endowment to guarantee such a program. . . . But I am not as competent to judge of this or of the wisest method of raising the funds necessary to make a start as you and President Hopkins are.”

By November, Alma Reed was again pressing Packard about the Dartmouth mural project.

“I am wondering if there is any development on the matter of the murals for Dartmouth,” she wrote. “Do you not think it would be advisable for Sr. Orozco to submit his drawings for the project, based, of course, on the architectural setting for the murals? He would be pleased to come to Dartmouth at any time, on his own responsibility, in order to take measurements.”

Orozco’s willingness to come at his own expense to assess the scope of the project was a turning point. Churchill Lathrop recalled: “Early in 1932, we had a brilliant revelation, an idea that might move the stalled project off dead center. The department had a small lecture budget;³ so, why not invite Orozco to give a lecture-demonstration on fresco painting? Such an unusual lecture, by a scholarly artist, would attract considerable student and community attention, and it would produce a few square feet of fresco: a small sample mural. Work-in-progress on even a small mural would have educational value. Also, the presence of Orozco would give the community the chance to observe his skill and judge his character.”⁴

The Artist Arrives

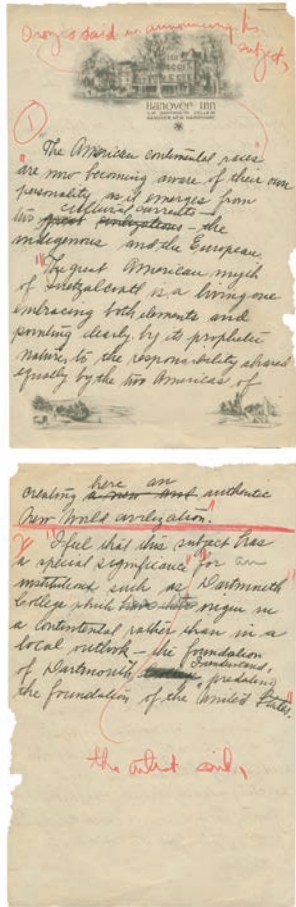
Orozco finally came to Dartmouth during the weekend of March 18–20, 1932. The fresco he painted on the occasion of this first visit was originally intended as the focal point of a mural cycle in the corridor connecting Carpenter Hall and the library on the theme of the Greek mechanical genius Daedalus.⁵ Various titles “Release,” “Man Released from the Mechanistic,” and, more descriptively, “Man Released from the Mechanistic to the Creative Life” (right), this first panel was, according to Orozco, “post-war” in theme. He stated in a press release dated May 25, 1932,

that the fresco “represents man emerging from a heap of destructive machinery symbolizing slavery, automatism, and the converting of a human being into a robot, without brain, heart, or free will, under the control of another machine. Man is now shown in command of his own hands and he is at last free to shape his own destiny.”

During their discussions of the project, Orozco and members of the Art Department became excited at the possibility of a mural in a larger and more accessible location than Carpenter Hall. They set their sights on the reserve reading room on the ground floor of

Man Released from the Mechanistic to the Creative Life





Orozco's proposal on Hanover Inn letterhead, May 1932. Dartmouth College Library, DL-34, box 2:8.

Baker Library, with which Carpenter is linked by a pedestrian passageway. Once he spotted the reserve room's long expanses of wall, Orozco abandoned Greek mythology for a theme that would retain the universal implications of mythology but be more specific to America. His excitement is palpable in the prospectus he wrote on Hanover Inn letterhead during a second visit to Dartmouth in early May of 1932 (left):

The American continental races are now becoming aware of their own personality, as it emerges from two cultural currents—the indigenous and the European. The great American myth of Quetzalcoatl is a living one embracing both elements and pointing clearly, by its prophetic nature, to the responsibility shared equally by the two Americas of creating here an authentic New World civilization. I feel that this subject has a special significance for an institution such as Dartmouth College which has its origin in a continental rather than in a local outlook—the foundation of Dartmouth, I understand, predating the foundation of the United States.⁶

As Orozco surely had been told, Dartmouth College was chartered by the King of England in 1769 in what was then the royal province of New Hampshire for the purpose of “the education and instruction of Youth of the Indian Tribes in this Land . . . and also of English Youth and any others.”

Artemas Packard made several weekend visits to New York to discuss details of the commission, and on June 9, 1932, a contract was signed by J. C. Orozco, Artemas Packard, and Dartmouth's treasurer, Halsey Edgerton.

It was agreed that Orozco would complete a mural project comprising 2,090 square feet (this figure apparently did not include the section across from the reserve desk) and give “such instruction in the technique of fresco painting as he cares to at his convenience.” The artist was to be paid a total of \$5,200 for an eighteen-month project—\$4,000 in compensation and \$1,200 for travel, room, and board. Orozco received \$250 on the execution of the agreement and another \$1,250 in late June for completion of his first panel, *The Prophecy*, over the door at the right-hand end of the reserve room's west wing (below). With these funds, Orozco was able to embark on a three-month trip to Europe, his first and only visit there.

The Prophecy



The Creation of the Murals

The following fall, the artist began receiving his fee in increments of \$200, paid on the first of each month. The balance was to be paid upon completion of the project, but by November 1933 it was clear that Orozco would not complete the mural within the allotted eighteen months (right). The concern of Dartmouth President Ernest Martin Hopkins, both for the artist and for his work, is revealed in a memorandum Hopkins sent to the College's bursar on November 23:

In the development of [Orozco's] murals . . . he has taken on much added space over anything that was originally contemplated. . . . With the additional work to be done, however, and with the decreasing span of time, it has seemed to me perfectly apparent that the last panels would have to be a slap-dash effort, largely without the merit of the careful work done on others. . . . On the other hand, I should be very unwilling to have him quixotically continuing his work and meanwhile being in financial distress because of added contribution. . . . In short, at the expiration of the present arrangement, will you please continue payments to Orozco so long as he may be here at the rate of \$2,500 for six months, and will you make available to him \$500 for expenses in connection with materials, etc. for his painting.

In total, Dartmouth College would pay José Clemente Orozco approximately \$7,000 for painting *The Epic of American Civilization*, in addition to \$500 for *Man Released from the Mechanistic to the Creative Life*. Accounting records further show that the College incurred \$2,177.05 in expenses in connection with



Work in progress on the west and north walls of *The Epic of American Civilization* (Orozco on scaffold), fall 1932.

the project, for a total cost of approximately \$10,000. This was the figure used by Hopkins in subsequent correspondence, although at the artist's request the cost of the mural was treated in a confidential manner.

Orozco did not want his remuneration compared with that of his rival, Rivera.⁷ Hopkins had his own public relations concerns about the cost of the project. He asked Artemas Packard to prepare for him comparative figures for other mural projects. According to Packard, Puvis de Chavannes was paid \$60,000 for the Boston Public Library stairway mural ("less than half the size of ours"), and the library paid John Singer Sargent \$20,000 for the murals he did on the top floor there. Rivera was being paid \$21,000 on the Rockefeller Center contract that would prove to be such a disaster—"presumably an especially low figure," according to Packard. Orozco's fee for the Dartmouth project, Packard concluded, "under ordinary

circumstances" would be \$50,000—over five times the amount he received.

Orozco signed and dated his last Dartmouth panel (right) on February 13, 1934. Six days later he, his wife, Margarita, and their three children returned to New York and thence to Mexico. The artist's final statement about his accomplishment was published in *The Dartmouth* on February 17:

Each panel has been a new experience, it has presented new problems. I have experimented with color, and organization of material. I am just beginning to realize what I have done and what all this has done to me.

Orozco was fifty years old when he left Dartmouth. Even greater artistic achievements lay ahead, but his Dartmouth mural remains one of the most developed summaries of his philosophy. It is also, in the opinion of many critics, the greatest mural cycle in the United States. Its main rival is Diego Rivera's contemporary *Detroit Industry* mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Unlike that work, *The Epic of American Civilization* was not commissioned by captains of industry for the municipal museum of a major city but by educators for the library of a New England college. In the end, the determination of Packard, Lathrop, and Hopkins to bring José Clemente Orozco to Dartmouth brought Dartmouth to the world in ways they may have anticipated but never could have foreseen.

Jacquelynn Baas is an independent art historian and a former director of the Hood Museum of Art.



Machine Totem

Notes

Quotations without citations are from correspondence and documents preserved in Special Collections, Dartmouth College Library.

1. David McClure and Elijah Parish, *Memoirs of the Rev. Eleazar Wheelock* (Newburyport, Mass.: Edward Little and Co., 1811), 97.

2. Churchill P. Lathrop, "How the Murals Were Commissioned," from the published papers of a Montgomery Endowment Symposium entitled *The Orozco Murals at Dartmouth College* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College, 1980), 2.

3. The source for this "small lecture budget" was Rockefeller tutorial money, the corpus of which was under the control of Dartmouth President Ernest Martin Hopkins.

4. Lathrop, "How the Murals Were Commissioned," 8.

5. A stack wing was later added to Baker Library, lowering the ceiling in this passageway and blocking a window whose light was crucial to Orozco's composition for this preliminary fresco.

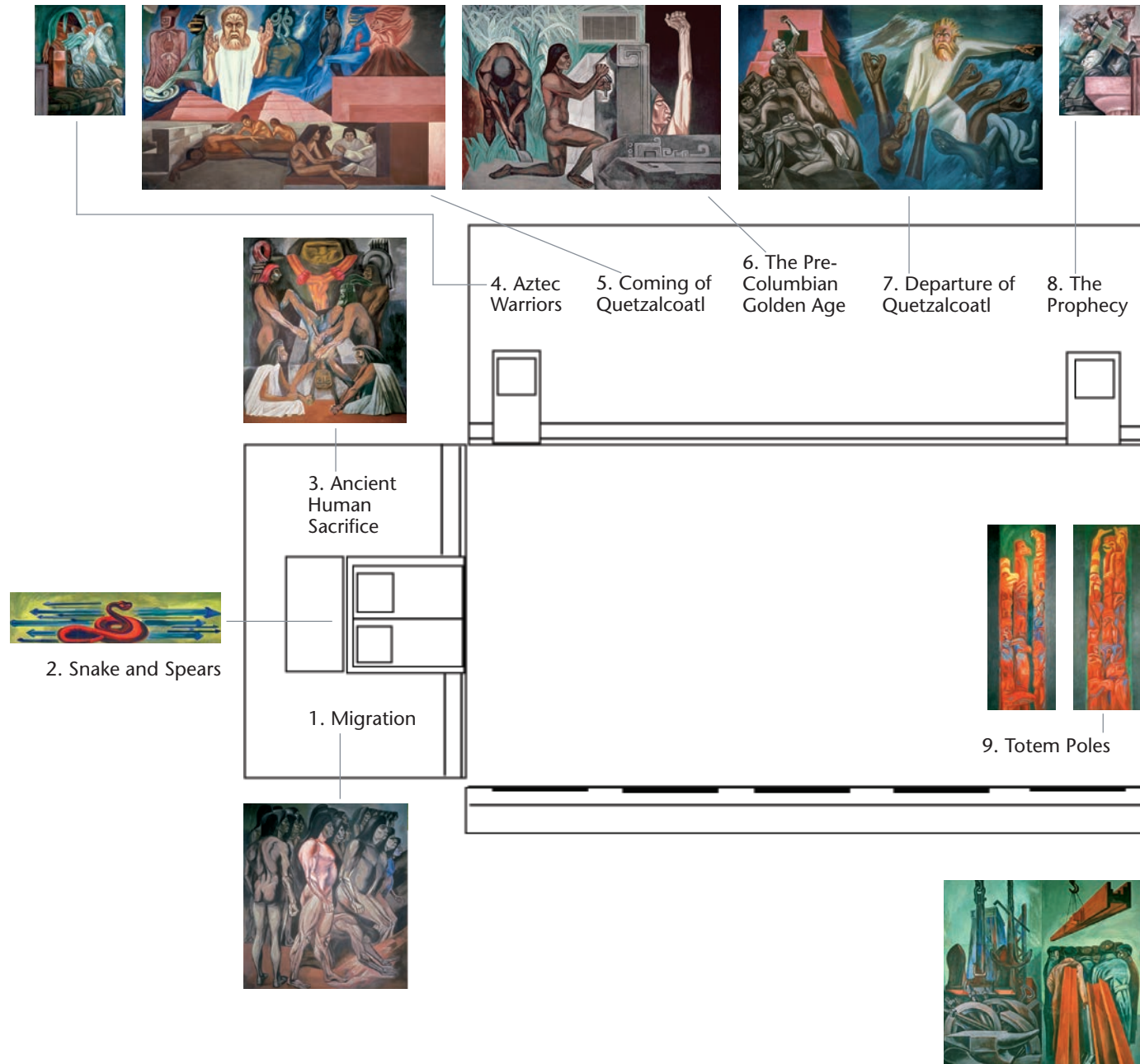
6. Orozco's statement was written for publication in the press release issued on May 25, 1932.

7. In a letter of August 28, 1934, to Edward Bruce, Hopkins wrote: "I have not given publicity to the exact details of the arrangement in general because of the deep professional jealousy that prevails between Orozco and Rivera, and the inclination which Rivera apparently has to boast of the larger income which he secures for his work as compared with anything which Orozco gets. Orozco's whole attitude toward us has been one of generous consideration, and I do not want to give support to his greatest living rival by the publication of data which might be misunderstood by the public."

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.

Please note: The titles to the mural’s panels were not assigned by Orozco but given to them after completion, possibly by Artemas Packard.





11. Cortez and the Cross

12. The Machine

13. Anglo-America

14. Hispano-America

15. Gods of the Modern World

16. Symbols of Nationalism



10. Machine Totems

17. Modern Human Sacrifice



18. Modern Migration of the Spirit



19. Chains of the Spirit



20. Modern Industrial Man





The West Wing: *The Coming and Departure of Quetzalcoatl*

1. Migration: In this initial panel, sometimes called *Ancient Human Migration*, Orozco depicts the origins of indigenous American civilization as a grimly determined and regimented march forward. *Modern Migration of the Spirit*, its thematic counterpart in the post-conquest section of the murals, appears directly across from it at the far end of the east wing.

2. Snake and Spears: The small panel over the door shows a rattlesnake flanked by spears, symbols of aggression that link panels with the themes of migration and sacrifice. The bright palette suggests that Orozco returned to paint this panel while completing the east wing.

3. Ancient Human Sacrifice: Orozco depicts the ritual of human sacrifice practiced by ancient indigenous Mesoamericans. The masked participants tear the heart out of a living enemy warrior and offer it to the gods to ensure the stability of the cosmic order. Orozco does not use this image to demonize ancient indigenous cultures, whose golden age he portrays in the panels that follow. Instead, he sets up correspondences with the modern sacrifices appearing in the mural's second half, especially the facing panel *Modern Human Sacrifice*, which represents the human costs of militaristic nationalism as a counterpoint to the needs of institutionalized religion fulfilled in *Ancient Human Sacrifice*.

4. Aztec Warriors: Orozco portrays representatives of the Aztec warrior class, who wear eagle and jaguar costumes to co-opt the powerful attributes of these creatures. The monumental sculptured head of a feathered snake in the foreground represents the plumed serpent god Quetzalcoatl, whose legend dominates the west wing of the murals.

5. Coming of Quetzalcoatl: Quetzalcoatl, the important Mesoamerican mythological figure, appears here in monumental human form, bestowing the blessings of learning, culture, and the arts on humanity. He also dispels the previously powerful pantheon of god behind him—from the left, Xipe Totec, the god of greed, dressed in the skins of his victims; Tezcatlipoca, the god of magic, with his feet of smoking mirrors; Tlaloc, the god of rain and storm; Mictlantecuhli, the god of death; Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, with his feet of feathers; and Huehuetotl, the god of fire, who lived in the cone of the volcano Orizaba. Quetzalcoatl inspires humanity, shown awakening from a deep sleep below him, to great acts of creativity, symbolized by the Temples of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacán. At the bottom right, the people conversing on the porch of a house symbolize the beginning of cooperation and understanding that is the basis of society.

6. The Pre-Columbian Golden Age: Quetzalcoatl's gifts of agriculture, the arts, and the sciences lead to a golden age of peaceful human cooperation, creativity, and understanding. Next to the man cultivating his crop of corn, a sculptor carves large stelae and an astronomer studies the stars, whose cycles are the basis of the Mesoamerican calendar, many religious beliefs, and the concept of universal knowledge.

7. Departure of Quetzalcoatl: Drawing on Mesoamerican myths, Orozco depicts sorcerer-devotees of the former gods—representing the human tendency toward superstition, greed, and aggression—driving Quetzalcoatl away and ending his peaceful reign. The gestures of the sorcerers, massed in front of a temple-topped pyramid, graphically oppose the lunging stance of the departing god. As Quetzalcoatl sails off on a raft of writhing serpents, he prophesies his return, pointing to the small panel depicting the armed European invasion and setting up the mural's subsequent narrative.

8. The Prophecy: This small panel of the armed, early sixteenth-century European invasion of the American continent was the first panel of the mural cycle that Orozco painted and is indicative of Quetzalcoatl's promise to return. This myth is now recognized to be not of Meso-American origin but developed post-conquest. It shows European military might embodied in the horse, a powerful weapon that was new to the continent. The armor-masked soldiers bear the Christian cross in the form of a huge weapon, an image declaring its role as a tool of subjugation and a justification for the European conquest.

9. Totem Poles: These caricatures of Northwest Coast totem poles, painted with *Machine Totems* toward the end of the project, incorporate the indigenous inhabitants of North America into the mural's narrative.

10. Machine Totems: These two vertical panels present fantastical conglomerations of machines and industrial elements, modern equivalents of the totem poles. Orozco's signature appears in the left panel.

The East Wing: *Cortez and the Modern Era*

11. Cortez and the Cross: In the first full panel of the east wing, which is devoted to modern, post-conquest civilization, Orozco paints a brutal portrait of the sixteenth-century Spanish invasion of Mexico led by Hernan Cortez. Orozco depicts Cortez as an anti-hero who, in the logic of the murals and their epic themes, fulfills the prophecy of Quetzalcoatl's return. However, he founds not a new golden age but a destructive, mechanistic society. The heavily armored, machinelike figure of Cortez, with his serene, detached expression far removed from the human suffering around him, stands at the center of the painting. Surrounded by destruction, including his own burning ships, he is accompanied by a Franciscan missionary clutching the cross, referring to the Church's ideological support of the invaders and enhancing the portrait of Cortez as a godlike presence.



12. The Machine: In this panel, the mural makes a thematic and historical leap into the twentieth century through an expressionistic portrait of a monstrous, chaotic machine with no recognizable function. The panel represents the concept of contemporary mechanization and symbolizes the mass regimentation of modern society. The machine's gray, jagged mass seems to feed on the human bodies piled at Cortez's feet in the adjacent panel, connecting his destructive imperialist project with the impersonal chaos of the modern era.

13. Anglo-America: Orozco creates an ambivalent portrait of contemporary North American society in this panel. Although the schoolhouse in the rear serves as a symbol of universal education, and the town meeting suggests the possibility for cooperative actions that benefit society as a whole, Orozco undermines these traditional associations in his depiction. The prominent figure of a tall, stern-faced schoolmarm, here an overbearing agent of control, typifies the culture. She is surrounded by strictly regimented, expressionless children. Behind them the adults arranged in rows at a New England town meeting present yet another example of cultural rigidity, offering a strong contrast to both the chaos and the determination displayed next in *Hispano-America*.

14. Hispano-America: Orozco presents a proud and determined Mexican rebel who strongly resembles the Mexican revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata, an important symbol of Mexican peasant struggles. Orozco places the rebel in a modern urban setting, besieged by the savage caricatures of the rich and the militaristic. This chaotic scene, representing Latin American idealism left at the hands of a powerful yet disintegrating modern order, stands in sharp contrast to the institutional and personal conformity of Anglo-American society depicted in the previous panel.

15. Gods of the Modern World: In this savage and satirical denunciation of modern institutional education and its indifference to the political turmoil of the 1930s, Orozco portrays skeletons dressed in academic garb presiding over the birth of useless knowledge, embodied by the skeletal fetus. The background flames recall Cortez's burning ships, and the embalmed fetuses resting on dusty tomes suggest the academy's intellectual impotence and the futile dissemination of false, meaningless knowledge. Indifferent to the crises of modern civilization, the academics remain focused on their intellectual world, dead to the burning issues of contemporary life.

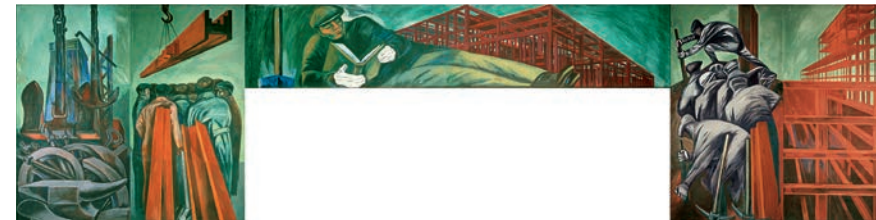
16. Modern Human Sacrifice: The body of an unknown soldier, whose skeletal hands still testify to his final agony, is buried beneath the trappings of patriotism: colorful flags, wreaths, monuments, speeches, brass bands, and the eternal flame that marks the grave of this victim of militaristic nationalism. This panel mirrors *Ancient Human Sacrifice* at the opposite end of the room, creating a thematic link between the two ages of American civilization through the pointless institutional sacrifice of the individual.

17. Symbols of Nationalism: The small panel at the end of the east wing shows a junk pile of historical symbols of warfare and empire, suggesting the continuity between the military aspirations of the European royal powers of the past and the modern militaristic nationalism highlighted next in *Modern Human Sacrifice*.

18. Chains of the Spirit: This small panel depicts vultures wearing clerical collars who hold the interlocked keys to the chains of physical and intellectual bondage piled beneath them.

19. Modern Migration of the Spirit: In this apocalyptic scene, a defiant, resurrected Christ, painted in acid colors and shedding his skin to reveal a newly enlivened body, returns in judgment to sweep away ideologies and institutions that thwart contemporary human emancipation and spiritual renewal. Orozco presents a Christ figure who not only rejects his sacrificial destiny by felling his cross but condemns and destroys the sources of his agony, military armaments and religious and cultural symbols here relegated to the junk heap of history behind him.

20. Modern Industrial Man: The mural's final panels appear directly across from the central reserve reading desk and the long walls of the murals, at a sort of resolution point between the pre-Hispanic and post-conquest halves of the cycle. In these panels, sometimes called *Ideal Modern Culture*, Orozco portrays in a subdued palette a possible future world to emerge from Christ's symbolic destruction of society, depicted in *Modern Migration of the Spirit*. In the four side panels, workers direct their own labor in a new society that is still under construction, though these anonymous figures at times appear threatened by the technology they wield. In the central panel, a reclining figure of mixed ancestry—European and indigenous American, or perhaps African American—is free to set down his tools and pursue his own education and spiritual nourishment. This figure recapitulates the themes of education, industry, and race within the mural's two sections.





Toward an Industrial Golden Age: *Orozco's Epic of American Civilization*

MARY K. COFFEY

José Clemente Orozco reorients the “epic of America” from the standard US narrative that begins with British colonization along the northeastern seaboard and proceeds heroically west to a Mexican story rooted in Mesoamerican civilizations and the devastation wrought by the Spanish Conquest. In so doing he locates America’s origins in Indo-Hispanic instead of Anglo-European culture, while characterizing our “civilization” as a traumatic rather than an enlightened inheritance. However, his mural should not be mistaken for an assertion of Mexican nationalism. Rather, Orozco reminds his audiences that “America” is a shared land-mass, not a synonym for the United States. In the 1930s Orozco’s continental perspective countered the parochialism of Protestant New England and the region’s privileged place within an increasingly xenophobic and isolationist national imaginary. While local artists, poets, and entrepreneurs were solidifying America’s Yankee identity through a pastoral vision of the regional landscape and its hearty, timebound folk, Orozco was limning an America overdetermined by technology, riven by social antagonisms, and on the brink of war. In this way, Orozco’s mural gives voice to everything that depression-era colonial revivalists, regionalists, and antimodernists sought to repress about modern America.

Orozco presents America’s epic as cyclical in nature, the eternal return of destruction and creation, rather than a linear tale of democratic

expansion and progress. He uses the reserve room’s division into two wings to divide his mural into “ancient” and “modern” epochs. The reserve desk functions as a spatial inter-regnum that marks the destruction of the ancient world and the violent birth of modernity. Orozco further exploits this architectural partition to draw analogies between the two periods, as the sequences of images along each wing mirror one another at various moments within the cycle. Ancient America begins with the migration of peoples into the Central Valley of Mexico and the arrival of Quetzalcoatl (left), an enlightened deity who establishes a Golden Age in which the arts, agriculture, and society flourish. Quetzalcoatl’s departure marks the decline of the ancient world and its destruction by conquistadors enacting Aztec portent. Modern America begins in Christian conquest, presided over by Cortez, Quetzalcoatl’s anti-heroic counterpart. In the panels that follow, American civilization is refracted through modernity’s dark lens. Human industry runs amok; individuality is deadened by a consensus society and the regimentation of standardized education. The cycle culminates in the blind fury of nationalist war and a Christian apocalypse. Like Quetzalcoatl before him, the resurrected Christ destroys what he helped to create. He chops down his cross and “migrates” the spirit toward a new millennium in which modern industrial man might bring about another Golden Age.

Coming of Quetzalcoatl (detail)



Modern Human Sacrifice

The Murals: A Closer Look

Orozco deploys formal and compositional devices to move the viewer through his story and reinforce comparisons across space and time. We follow the leaning bodies depicted in *Ancient Migration* to the next panel, *Ancient Human Sacrifice* (above). Orozco equates this Aztec ritual with the blood sacrifice of modern war, depicted directly opposite at the far end of the reserve room. In *Modern Human Sacrifice*, an unknown soldier's skeletal frame mimics the flayed posture of the sacrificial victim. A war monument stands in the place of the Huitzilopochtli monolith, while a grandstanding politician presides over the offering like a latter-day priest. Orozco forges similar analogies between other panels. For example, the academics presiding over stillborn knowledge in *Gods of the*

Modern World visually reiterate the friezelike pantheon of Aztec deities arrayed behind Quetzalcoatl in the panel depicting his arrival.

Orozco enhances the drama of his story by creating visual tension through the juxtaposition of formally contrasting images. For example, he frames the Quetzalcoatl sequence along the north wall of the west wing with panels depicting Aztec warriors on the far left and conquistadors (*The Prophecy*) at the far right. They confront one another from across the wall's expanse, linking the Conquest to the militaristic impulses subtending both Spanish and Aztec society but also establishing Quetzalcoatl's reign as an enlightened parenthesis within the epic of

American civilization. As Quetzalcoatl departs on his raft of serpents, he points dramatically toward his prophesy. An abyss opens between the god and his people as they lean backward, in dynamic opposition to the forward thrust of his gesture. Their regression disrupts the visual momentum of the cycle, and our attention is pulled in two directions at once. Like a rubber band that has snapped, the ancient world recedes from view as we are flung headlong into the Spanish onslaught and our mechanized future.

In one of the most powerful juxtapositions in the cycle, Orozco contrasts "Anglo-" and "Hispano-" American society through opposed



Anglo-America



Hispano-America



Cortez and the Cross

but complementary compositions (below). The figures in *Anglo-America* are gathered into rows that form a neat circle. They focus inward, gazing toward an empty space at the heart of the image. Zombielike children trail a stern schoolmarm who monitors the scene along the righthand margin. If *Anglo-America* claims a highly disciplined agora with nothing at its core, *Hispano-America* spirals in an orgy of cruelty around the charismatic figure of the revolutionary hero. In the former composition, our eye traverses the orderly crowd along horizontal registers that convey a sense of steady balance. In the latter, our gaze moves in circles as we trace the motion of the corrupt generals, politicians, and capitalists that rotate around the doomed guerilla. The composition is simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal, suggesting that the violence depicted is endemic and explosive. If the yellow block of wheat depicted

in the foreground of *Anglo-America* echoes the regimentation of US society, the round gold coins spilling along the base of *Hispano-America* parallel the cycles of greed and corruption that perpetually undo Mexican society.

The Idea behind the Art

Throughout the mural, Orozco's depiction of pictorial space functions as a code for interpreting his political message. In general, Orozco employs cubist techniques—a shallow sense of space, fragmentation, and a flattening of the composition that pushes against the wall's surface rather than receding toward a distanced vanishing point—to indicate a chaotic and disordered society. When representing a functioning and productive social order, however, Orozco employs a more conventional one-point perspective. For example, in *The Coming of Quetzalcoatl* the pre-Columbian Golden Age fostered by the god is signaled by rational pictorial space. A diagonal brick wall divides the composition and recedes toward a single point located between the pyramids of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacán, "Place of the Gods." Conversely, in *Cortez and the Cross* (left) Orozco illustrates the destruction of conquest by fragmenting objects and flattening depicted space. Here, the visual recession suggested by the rectangular boulder lying at Cortez's foot is interrupted by a gangrenous cross that halts the movement of our eye, obstructs our view, and refers us back to the picture plane. The shallow composition reads as claustrophobic when compared to the breathing room in the more pacific *Quetzalcoatl* scenes. The rubble heap that Cortez has made of *Quetzalcoatl*'s civilization scales the wall, refusing any comfortable entry into the scene.

This spatial contrast is most evident in the three panels that comprise the cycle's final sequence, *Modern Industrial Man* (right), located across from the reserve desk. In the central image, a racially indistinct worker has laid down his hammer and picked up a book. Like the building behind him (a metaphor for society), he is "under construction." His body echoes the lines of the building's steel frame, and through this analogy Orozco argues that the future of American civilization hinges upon humanity's relationship to industry. The two flanking panels present "good" and "bad" alternatives. On the left, icons of industry—an anvil, wheels, an anchor, steel struts—are layered tightly within a shallow composition. Put to no productive use, their benefit for humanity remains unclear. The dehumanized landscape in this panel recalls the industrial nightmare depicted in *The Machine*. Nearby, workers huddle under a precariously suspended I-beam. Two identical beams erupt into the foreground, forming a barrier between the viewer and the men depicted there. Like Cortez's cross, the upright girders reinforce the picture plane and are at odds with the perspective suggested by the diagonal recession of the suspended beam. This visual tension makes the scene anxious, proposing a future in which industry threatens to imprison or crush modern man. On the righthand side, the reverse is true. Here, men labor in unison to erect a skyscraper. The space recedes rationally toward a vanishing point along the diagonal lines of the steel girders. The building under construction recalls the fallow architecture depicted in *Hispano-America*. However, in the earlier panel, broken windows indicated the failure to bring about a new society after the Mexican Revolution. Here, the project seems to be proceeding apace. In the

righthand panel, modern man is in full command of industry, just as he was in the ancient Golden Age.

Orozco's Murals: Art for All

In his 1928 manifesto "New Worlds, New Races, New Art" (*Creative Art* 4, no. 1 [1929], republished in *¡Orozco! 1883–1949* [Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1980], 46), Orozco equates the modern skyscraper with his attempts to forge a new mural art commensurate with the novel spirit and racial culture that emerged in the Americas. The "architecture of Manhattan is a new value," he writes, "something that has nothing to do with Egyptian pyramids, with the Paris Opera, with the Giralda of Seville, or with Saint Sofia, any more than it has to do with the maya [*sic*] palaces of Chichen-Itza or with the 'pueblos' of Arizona." Mural art, like the Manhattan skyline, must eschew tradition and generate its own visual language within a new cycle of human creation. For Orozco, it was the public nature of mural art that elevated it above other art forms, for, as he claimed, "it cannot be hidden away for the benefit of a certain privileged few." With this statement in mind,

we can read *Modern Industrial Man* as a literal transcription of Orozco's manifesto as well as a lament for his own position as a public artist working for the "privileged few." In the United States Orozco found that there was no "disinterested" public sphere—even mural art could be made a "matter of private gain."

Given the artist's stated convictions that mural art "is for the people . . . for ALL," this final sequence has often been interpreted as an endorsement of the working-class politics of Orozco's Marxist peers within the mural movement. However, close scrutiny reveals that Orozco deviates in important ways from this ideology. Like the Mesoamerican man who lies dreaming under Quetzalcoatl's stern but benevolent ascent, *Modern Industrial Man* is defined by his relationship to leisure, not a mode of production. It is his capacity for self-edification—his intellectual as opposed to physical labor—that matters. Significantly, Orozco makes this bid for self-directed learning in the reading room of a library at a private college. After his fiery denunciation of institutionalized knowledge in *Gods of the Modern World*, he seems to be advocating for public access to the resources

of higher education. However, Orozco's mural is less an indictment of Dartmouth in particular than a radically unorthodox expression of socialist humanism or even anarchism. While acknowledging its location, his mural addresses the broader plight of humanity under the conditions of private ownership, exploitation, and social inequality that capitalism entails.

Identified by his humanity rather than his class or race, Orozco's "modern industrial man" suggests the possibility of a new Golden Age, depending upon which way we turn. If we go left, we reenter the catastrophe of the modern world. If we go right, we find ourselves renewing the cycle of enlightenment. But this is not the atavistic return to a premodern utopia advocated in the regionalist painting of the period or the indigenist politics of his Mexican colleagues. Rather, Orozco leaves us at the threshold of an industrial future in which man and modernity are reconciled through the productive labor of the mind, not the body or the machine.

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Modern Industrial Man



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