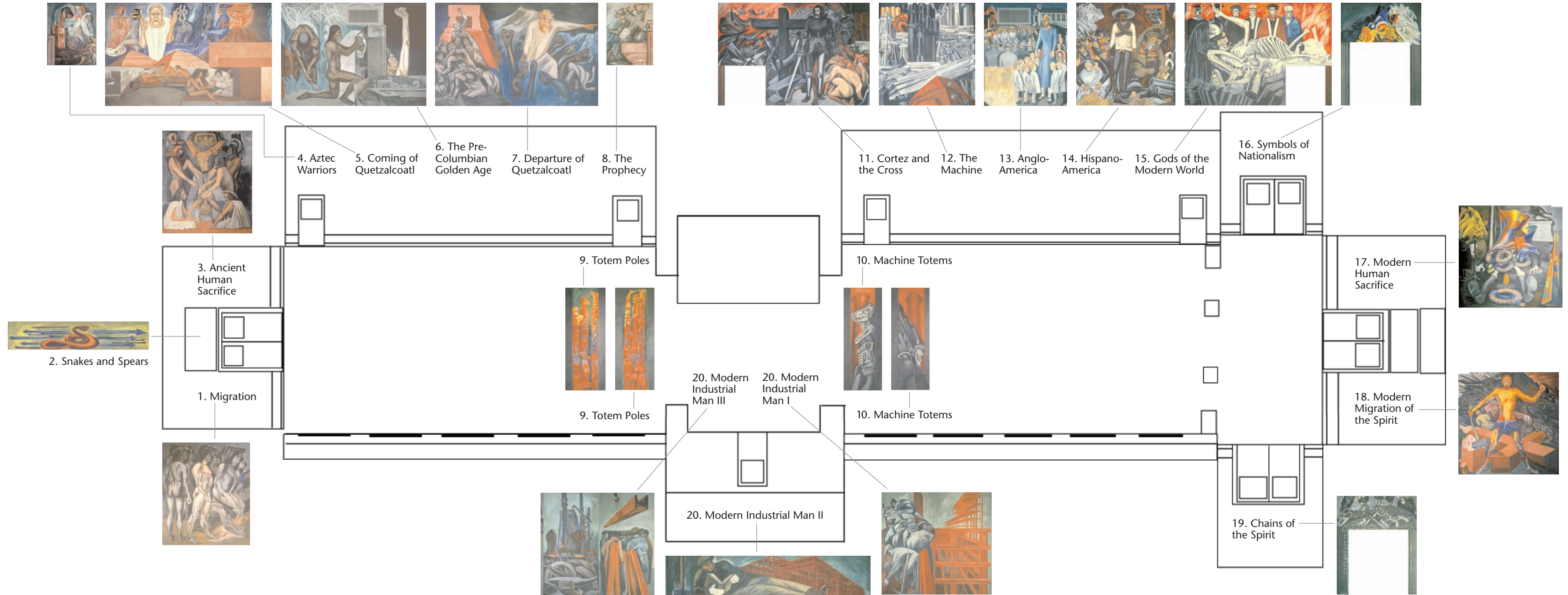


**A Visitor's Guide to  
The Epic of American Civilization**

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.





### 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 following panels. Instead, he sets up correspondences with the modern sacrifices appearing in the murals' 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 gods 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 Huehueteotl, 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 murals' subsequent narrative.

**8. The Prophecy:** This small portrait of the armed, early-sixteenth-century European invasion of the American continent was the first panel of the mural cycle that Orozco painted. 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 narrative, 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. 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*.

**17. 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.

**18. Modern Migration of the Spirit:** In the apocalyptic climax of the mural cycle, 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.

**19. 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.

**20. Modern Industrial Man (five panels):** The mural's final panels appear directly across from the central reserve reading desk and the long walls of the mural, 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 symbolically resolves the competing but complementary qualities of North American and Latin American cultures, both European and indigenous in origin.

