

# THE ART OF RAMÓN CONTRERAS AND THE MEXICAN MURALISTS MOVEMENT



## QUICK SKETCHES

The ancient tradition of mural painting dates back to cave paintings more than 30,000 years old. The technique of painting frescos on wet plaster started circa 1500 BC. on the island of Crete in Greece. The Mexican mural tradition revived the fresco technique, but David Siqueiros soon created his murals using more “public” media, including commercial enamels used for painting airplanes and cars. This experimentation led to the development of the acrylic paints used by artists today.

Gerardo Murillo Coronado (1875–1964), better known by his pseudonym, Dr. Atl, was “one of the most peculiar individuals born in the American Continent” according to Diego Rivera. A painter, writer, hiker, philosopher, vulcanologist and politician, he used his skills as an alchemist to develop new resin-based pigments for mural painting called “Atlcolors”. Atlcolors are still in use today.

Diego Rivera studied art in Barcelona, Paris, Ghent, London, Italy, and Paris, where he met artists including Juan Gris, Picasso, Braque, and Modigliani. As a result of these influences, he devoted himself to Cubism between 1913 and 1918.

Diego Rivera and his assistants painted a series of 235 fresco panels at the Ministry of Education in Mexico City that covered an area of 15,000 square feet between 1923 and 1928.

Diego Rivera left Mexico for the United States when he was expelled from the Communist Party in 1930 as a “false revolutionist.”

Nelson Rockefeller commissioned a mural entitled “Man at the Crossroads” by Diego Rivera at the Rockefeller Center in New York. Among others, Rivera depicted Edsel Ford, Jean Harlow, Charlie Chaplin, and Vladimir Lenin. Rockefeller asked Rivera to remove Lenin’s image; when he refused, Rockefeller had the mural chiseled off the wall.

Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros fought in the Mexican Revolution and, from 1937 to 1939, with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. He was later sent to prison for participating in the murder of Leon Trotsky.

Francisco Madero, the first president of Mexico after the Mexican Revolution started and an early instigator of the revolution, was educated at the University of California, Berkeley.

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Land reform after the Revolution resulted in the *ejido*, a farm cooperative program that redistributed land from the wealthy to the peasants. Today, more than half the farmland in Mexico is composed of *ejidos*.

The PRI political party was established during the Mexican Revolution. It remained the dominant party in Mexico for 71 years, until the election of Vicente Fox.

Los tres grandes of the Mexican Muralists movement emphasized public art, declaring “easel art” a product of the aristocracy. Rivera and Siqueiros continued to accept private commissions for paintings on canvas; Orozco, however, destroyed all his earlier canvases and devoted the rest of his life to the ideals of social art.

Diego Rivera and Frieda Kahlo married in 1929. Kahlo was strongly influenced by the traditional Mexican folk culture, although her father was a German immigrant. She usually dressed as an Amerindian, and claimed she was born at the start of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 (she was actually born in 1907).

Siqueiros' mural on Olvera Street in Los Angeles was commissioned as a tourist attraction for a Bavarian beer garden.

Murals can be made of many materials, using many techniques: fresco, various sorts of paints, chalk, tile and glass mosaic, molded concrete, vegetable dyes—even neon lights.

“La América Tropical” was created in 1932 by David Siqueiros as a fresco, but using an airgun on cement. It was the first large-scale mural in the United States that created public art by being painted on an ordinary building wall. Conservative politics of the 1930s triumphed over art, and the section of the mural visible from Olvera Street was painted over within six months; within a year, the entire mural was covered. It was rediscovered in the late 1960s and is now under restoration by the Getty Institute.

The California Art Preservation Act of 1982 and the federal Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990 support the protection of artists' rights in regard to the alteration or destruction of their works. If an owner of a building wants to tear down or alter a structure on which a mural has been created, the artist has 90 days to remove the mural.

Painted murals on exterior surfaces are subject to flaking, erosion, staining, fading, and vandalism. Acrylic paints are particularly vulnerable to the UV rays of sunlight. Although acrylic colors appear to be faded, if xylene or toluene is sprayed on the surface, the acrylic is lubricated at a molecular level and the colors reappear as bright as when they were first painted.