

THE LONG ARM OF THE WALL:
MURAL, MYTH, AND MEMORY IN *AMÉRICA TROPICAL*

by

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Introduction

In pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, perhaps as early as the first millennium BCE, the priests of Xipe Totec donned the flayed skin of a person sacrificed by heart extraction, transforming themselves into the deity. They wore the rotting skin until it fell off, which signaled the time to plant life-sustaining maize.¹ This annual rite of sacrifice guaranteed regeneration and renewal, not unlike Christian commemorations of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Both Mesoamerican and Christian cultures celebrated these events in their art. Many museums' Mesoamerican collections include figures that seem to wear a shirt but have an extra pair of hands dangling from the wrist; these represent the Xipe Totec ritual (Figure 1). In the Christian tradition, Christ nailed to the cross only started appearing in paintings in the sixth century; the representation remains prominent today. Nearly two thousand years after Christ's crucifixion, five hundred after the Spanish arrived in Mesoamerica and replaced the Xipe Totec ritual with Christianity, a modern work of art was born, died, and came back to life on a wall near downtown Los Angeles. Its resurrection nourished a new generation.

In 1932, Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros painted a dramatic mural that confronted Los Angeles with a powerful condemnation of imperialism, at a time when the Depression's threat to Anglo prosperity exacerbated anxieties over union activity, communism, and immigrant populations. Although art historians have long treated the mural as a footnote in Siqueiros's career, *América Tropical: Oprimida y Destrozada por los Imperialismos (Tropical*

¹ Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 188.

America: Oppressed and Destroyed by Imperialisms) stands out as one of his boldest political statements (Figure 2). The authorities responded by immediately requiring Siqueiros to leave the United States and, between 1933 and 1938, completely covering the image with white paint. Over the course of four decades, *América Tropical* lay forgotten until the whitewash, like a flayed skin, rotted and fell off.

While Siqueiros painted *América Tropical*, Los Angeles politicians, bureaucrats, and businessmen marginalized and expelled the city's Mexican-Americans in an effort to mitigate the Depression's effects on Anglos. I use the term "Mexican-American" to refer to people of Mexican heritage living in the United States. The hyphen conveys the designation's hybrid nature, but the expression still elides important nuances of ancestry, language, national borders, citizenship, and group identity. The terms "Mexican" and "American" suffer similar limitations, as does the term "Anglo," which I use to refer to the descendants of Northern Europeans whose culture defined Los Angeles from the late 1800s until recently.

Los Angeles's Mexican-American population coalesced as an ethnic group and distinctive culture between the 1930s and the mid-1960s. During this period, they also explored ways to address the imbalance of power with Anglos. Union activity and communist rhetoric dominated until World War II. Throughout the 1950s, Mexican-Americans tested a strategy of assimilation and tried to change the system by encouraging people to vote. When this effort yielded little progress, experiments with non-violent protests, aggressive publicity, marches, and other more assertive, in some cases even militant, demands for change followed. These actions, echoed in other parts of the United States and among other minority groups, developed into the Chicano movement in about 1965. Activists reclaimed the word "Chicano" from its early pejorative usage and made it a badge of ethnic pride; in some contexts, it may carry inflections of

class or immigration status.² In this essay, it describes a social movement that lasted from the mid-1960s until about 1980, as well as participants and artists who self-identify as Chicanos.

Activists in the Chicano movement recognized the need to build community esteem to counter decades of marginalization. Theater, poetry, music, art, and even clothing, posture, and slang signaled a strong, proud culture. Coincidentally, in about 1968, *América Tropical* reappeared through the decaying whitewash. Chicano activists embraced the mural, with its particular history and extraordinary content, as a symbol for their past and present struggles. *América Tropical* became part of Chicano mural iconography even as Chicanos worked to preserve its remains.

América Tropical has received little attention in art historical scholarship on Siqueiros, which focuses on his politics and his innovative materials and techniques. Chicana activist and art historian Shifra Goldman's 1974 "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles" includes the only formal analysis of the mural and the most comprehensive investigation of its making and destruction.³ Chicano art scholarship identifies Siqueiros, the only of *Los Tres Grandes* Mexican muralists alive and active in the late 1960s, as a particularly strong influence on the movement's visual arts, but *América Tropical* amounts to an historical curiosity.⁴

My exploration of the relationship between *América Tropical* and Chicano activism relies on primary sources, including the Siqueiros Papers at the Getty Research Institute, Chicano artists', activists', and art historians' archives, and news sources like the *Los Angeles Times* and *La Opinion*. I first examine the environment that led to the 1932 mural's creation, including the

² Shifra M. Goldman and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *Arte Chicano: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography of Chicano Art, 1965-1981* (Berkeley: Chicano Studies Library Publications Unit, University of California, 1985), 12.

³ Shifra M. Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," *Art Journal* 33, no. 4 (1974): 321–27. Although not Chicana by birth, Goldman dedicated much of her career to Chicano causes.

⁴ The other two members of *Los Tres Grandes* were José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera.

artist's motivations and the critical matters of its location and content. Part of this discussion challenges accepted accounts of the patrons' intent as well as previous interpretations of the mural's formal qualities and meaning. I then turn to the emergence of the Chicano movement and the events of the mural's rediscovery to consider how *América Tropical* operated as an icon. Finally, I show how Chicanos preserved *América Tropical's* legacy through their art and by working to return the 1932 mural to public view. *América Tropical* provided sustenance for Chicanos as they took on Los Angeles's power structure in the early 1970s; in turn, Chicanos passed the story of *América Tropical* to future generations.

América Tropical: Mural

Siqueiros unveiled *América Tropical* on October 9, 1932. The mural depicted an eagle attacking a crucified man as two revolutionaries aimed a rifle at the vicious bird. Interpretations of the scene typically characterize it as a call to violent action against U.S. society, represented by the eagle, to remedy the United States' imperialist subjugation of the proletariat, embodied in the crucified man. According to most accounts, the image shocked its patrons and Los Angeles's political establishment. By November, the U.S. Department of Labor's Immigration Service refused Siqueiros's request for a visa extension and requested his immediate departure. Given the political and economic environment in Los Angeles in 1932 and Siqueiros's reputation, it is something of a miracle that the artist was able to enter the country, let alone procure a commission for an outdoor mural on Olvera Street, adjacent to Los Angeles's Plaza and one of the most racially charged sites in the city.

Today the Hollywood Freeway (US 101), César Chávez Avenue, and Main, Alameda, and Los Angeles Streets encircle Olvera Street and the Plaza, with Union Station, completed in 1939, less than five hundred feet away. Laid out between 1825 and 1830, the area formed a nexus early in Los Angeles's history. Olvera Street and the Plaza served as the social, religious, economic, and political hub for the territory settled in 1781 by subjects of the Spanish crown, almost all of mixed indigenous, European, and some African heritage.⁵ The region remained a

⁵ For more on the history of Los Angeles and its Mexican-American population, see Rodolfo Acuña, *A Community under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River, 1945-1975* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles, 1984); Mike Davis, "Sunshine and the Open Shop,"

part of New Spain, renamed Mexico after independence in 1821, until the United States' 1848 victory in the Mexican American War. From 1848 through the 1960s, the Plaza was a place where Anglo visions for the city encountered the realities of the Mexican-American presence. The U.S. military briefly headquartered on Olvera Street immediately after the Mexican American War. Within twenty-five years of their arrival, Anglo settlers re-landscaped the Plaza, changing the Spanish square to a more American circular design.⁶

By the 1900 census, the Anglo population had grown so quickly that Mexican-Americans as a percent of Los Angeles's population fell from eighty to less than fifteen percent. Anglos thrived, but wealth especially accrued to a small group of businessmen. Press, transit, and water barons, like *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harrison Gray Otis and utilities tycoon Henry E. Huntington, soon controlled Los Angeles's political and economic apparatus.

Historian John Laslett considers events of the 1920s the genesis of Los Angeles's ongoing racial tensions. Labor contractors looking for abundant, cheap labor to fuel Southern California's economic growth found a receptive work force in Mexico. For Mexican nationals, Los Angeles's relatively stable political and economic environment offered an attractive alternative to the situation at home, where President Porfirio Díaz's government ultimately collapsed into the Mexican Revolution in 1910. At the same time, Anglo job-seekers, primarily

in *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s*, ed. Tom Sitton and William Francis Deverell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 96–122; William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); John H. M. Laslett, "Historical Perspectives: Immigration and the Rise of a Distinctive Urban Region, 1900-1970," in *Ethnic Los Angeles*, ed. Roger David Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996), 39–75; Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and David Willhoite, "The Story of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act: How Cesar Chavez Won the Best Labor Law in the Country and Lost the Union," *California Legal History* 7 (December 2012): 409–43.

⁶ William D. Estrada, *Los Angeles's Olvera Street* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2006), 9.

Protestant Midwesterners, flocked to Los Angeles, bringing cultural expectations that clashed with the distinct culture of an established and growing Mexican-American population.

As Anglos sought to make Los Angeles a showcase for Anglo-American progress and prosperity, they developed a two-pronged strategy to deal with “the Mexican problem”: repress and romanticize. Repression started immediately following the Mexican American War. Anglo vigilantism complemented legislative and tax maneuvers that overturned centuries-old property rights. Segregation and discriminatory practices confined Mexican-Americans to marginal jobs and neighborhoods. During the 1920s, Otis’s successor at the *Los Angeles Times*, local power broker Harry Chandler, led efforts to shape the area’s business climate. The blueprint included a racially segregated labor force configured to eliminate class conflict, gain production efficiencies, and maintain a non-union, open shop environment. The city’s politically and economically powerful enforced this program with black lists, deportations, harassment, violence, and political machinations.

The shock of the Depression in the early 1930s aggravated tensions between Los Angeles’s Anglos and its Mexican-Americans. Repatriation campaigns designed to return Mexicans to Mexico would allegedly free up jobs for Anglos and relieve pressure on relief rolls. Mexican-Americans’ legal and citizenship status became open to interpretation.⁷ Policies varied by locale, depending on who held power, businesses or nativists seeking to maintain “racial purity.” In Los Angeles, the Citizens Committee on Coordination of Unemployment Relief, which promoted repatriation, found itself in conflict with the Chamber of Commerce, which

⁷ Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 34–38. Rhetoric around the repatriations tended to overlook any claim this population had to being called Americans, even in a hyphenated sense like Mexican-American. More than a few U.S. citizens were sent “back” to Mexico.

fretted over supplies of cheap labor. The Depression and repatriation had profound consequences. Single men and recent arrivals constituted the majority of those who departed Los Angeles, while second-generation immigrants with families remained. These demographic changes along with new socio-economic realities led to a distinctive Mexican-American culture, as historian George Sánchez persuasively argues in *Becoming Mexican American*. At the same time, immigration round ups and police brutality made the community more receptive to union organizing efforts and radicalism.

Along with efforts to keep the Mexican-American population in its place, Anglos conceived projects that romanticized and sanitized Los Angeles's Mexican-American heritage. These projects included a Mexican market on Olvera Street, La Fiesta de Los Angeles parades, and John McGroaty's *The Mission Play*. The September 1931 sesquicentennial parade manifested Los Angeles's indifference to its Mexican past. Writer John Weaver reported, "[E]ven white couples, with twenty-two white children in tow, represented the forty-four black and brown *pobladores* who had come north from Mexico to establish [Los Angeles]."⁸

Throughout the 1920s, the area around Olvera Street drew immigrants, most from Mexico, but many from Italy, China, and elsewhere. Sánchez describes how it offered a sense of place and the networks and services that new arrivals needed:

For single male migrants through the mid 1920s, the central Plaza area of Los Angeles remained the most important area of introduction to the city. . . . Theaters, restaurants, bars, dancing clubs, and pool halls nearby catered to [the single men who dominated community life]. The Plaza itself was often used as a[n] employment recruitment site, and on the weekends served as a locus for political discussions. Rental housing, including boarding houses for single men, was the norm in the barrio around the Plaza. . . . Although other ethnic newcomers to Los Angeles increasingly flocked to the Plaza in the 1920s, most

⁸ John D. Weaver, *El Pueblo Grande: Los Angeles from the Brush Huts of Yangna to the Skyscrapers of the Modern Megalopolis* (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press, 1973), 79.

notably Italian and Chinese, Mexicans remained the largest group in the historic Mexican pueblo plaza area.⁹

The concentrated presence of so many working-class men also attracted radical activists, such as Emma Goldman, Ricardo Flores Magón, Upton Sinclair, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Socialist and Communist Parties.¹⁰ Efforts to unionize Los Angeles's Mexican-American workers saw few successes before the Dressmakers' Strike in 1933, but organizers laid the groundwork during the 1920s and 1930s with rallies and speeches in the Plaza.¹¹ A Mexican-American who worked as a paver said he often visited the Plaza on Sundays in 1926 or 1927: "I go to the little square to hear some of the fellow workers. This is where I have gotten socialistic ideas. . . . I now see that [religion is] the invention of the bourgeoisie in order to have us always working for them."¹²

Eventually Olvera Street and the Plaza, full of unattached men, inexpensive rental housing, and bars, began to deteriorate. An Anglo woman who would soon take the lead in transforming Olvera Street, Christine Sterling, reported on her visit in the mid-1920s:

I visited the old Plaza, the birthplace of the City and found it forsaken and forgotten. The old Plaza Church, Mother and Grandmother of every church in Los Angeles, was suffocated in a cheap, sordid atmosphere. The old Pio Pico House built by the last Mexican governor in California, its once fine patio filled in with a pool hall, the balconies torn away, filth everywhere. . . . Down a dirty alley I discovered an old adobe, dignified even in its decay. Across the front door was nailed a black-and-white sign, "CONDEMNED."¹³

⁹ Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 135.

¹⁰ Jean Bruce Poole and Tevvy Ball, *El Pueblo: The Historic Heart of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 2002), 63–64.

¹¹ Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 229.

¹² Manuel Gamio, *The Mexican Immigrant: His Life-Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), 127–28.

¹³ Christine Sterling, *Olvera Street: Its History and Restoration* (Los Angeles: Adobe Studios, 1933), 9.

Sterling mounted a campaign to save Olvera Street. In place of the multi-ethnic immigrant neighborhood, which included Chinese businesses in the Garnier Building and a community center for Los Angeles's Italians, Sterling planned a sentimental scene. Olvera Street would manifest "[Mexican] romance and picturesqueness . . . which we so freely advertise ourselves as possessing."¹⁴ The project failed to progress until Sterling gained the support of Harry Chandler, who contributed funds, connections, and the editorial power of the *Los Angeles Times*.¹⁵

Sterling marshalled all available resources. The Hammond Lumber Company, the Simons Brick Company, and others donated materials, and the police chief provided prison labor.¹⁶ After completing the project in early 1930, she described the reinvented Olvera Street:

Olvera Street holds for me all of the charm, and beauty which I dreamed for it, because out of the hearts of the Mexican people is spun the gold of Romance and Contentment. No sweeter, finer people live, on this earth, than the men and women of México and what ever evil anyone believes about them has been bred in the darkness of ignorance and prejudice.¹⁷

Sterling had Olvera Street closed to traffic and paved. Pedestrians could now browse the Anglo-operated shops in restored buildings, many from the Spanish colonial period. In the center of the street, visitors found Mexican-American operated *puestos*, or market stalls. To maintain an "authentic" Mexican atmosphere, Sterling required that the *puesteros* wear "typical" sombreros and serapes, and the *puesteras* colorful flounced skirts.¹⁸ Within two years, Sterling's fanciful Mexican marketplace on Olvera Street would host a radical muralist's bold statement.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Poole and Ball, *El Pueblo*, 50.

¹⁶ Sterling, *Olvera Street*, 14–15.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸ Phoebe S. Kropp, "Citizens of the Past? Olvera Street and the Construction of Race and Memory in 1930s Los Angeles," *Radical History Review*, no. 81 (Fall 2001): 40, 46–48. Though probably not informing Sterling's vision, the practice of dividing market stalls between elite holders of fixed shops and indigenous holders of temporary structures dates back to seventeenth-century New Spain, and possibly Aztec practices. Ray Hernández-

David Alfaro Siqueiros arrived in Los Angeles in May 1932, on the run from the law in Mexico. Siqueiros had spent the late 1920s organizing strikes among Mexican silver miners and peasant farmers; his success eventually led to his arrest and imprisonment.¹⁹ Art historian Leonard Folgarait commented, “[O]ne could not call Siqueiros a painter in the last half of the 1920s. He had become a full time revolutionary union organizer.”²⁰ After six months, the government released Siqueiros from prison under bond and confined him to the mining town of Taxco.²¹

Prohibited from participating in politics or union organizing while in prison and Taxco, Siqueiros returned to his first calling, art. Starting at an early age, he had received a classical arts education, including lessons in neoclassical style, “endless still-life projects,” and European art history, at the Academia de San Carlos in Mexico City.²² In 1914 he joined the Mexican Revolution, enlisting in Venustiano Carranza’s Constitutionalist Army. The army experience opened Siqueiros’s eyes to new possibilities for his art. He later recalled:

The army marches [during the Revolution] made us see that we had a marvelous, extraordinary country. . . , that we had a surprising pre-Hispanic tradition, as important as any in Greece or Egypt or ancient China. Mexico’s pre-Hispanic art was an amazingly rich, advanced art, of a plasticity without equal. Those marches also gave us colonial art, the art of the sixteenth century, those superior works

Durán, Associate Professor of Early Modern Ibero-American Colonial Arts and Architecture, University of New Mexico, Conversation with the author, March 15, 2016.

¹⁹ For Siqueiros’s biography, see Philip Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1994); Raquel Tibol, *Siqueiros, Introdutor de Realidades* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, 1961); and D. Anthony White, *Siqueiros: Biography of a Revolutionary Artist* (Encino, CA: Floricanto Press, 1994).

²⁰ Leonard Folgarait, *So Far from Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros’ “The March of Humanity” and Mexican Revolutionary Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 33.

²¹ Letter from Siqueiros to Comité Central del Partido Comunista del Uruguay, March 1, 1933, quoted in Raquel Tibol “Carta de Siqueiros en el Coloquio de Historia del Arte,” *Proceso*, October 4, 1993, 53, clipping in Box 192, Folder 15, Shifra M. Goldman Papers, CEMA 119, Department of Special Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, University of California, Santa Barbara. I provide all translations, except when otherwise noted.

²² Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 27.

made by Spanish masters and Indian artisans and bricklayers. In those works two great cultures merged together.²³

In a surprising way, Siqueiros's army career advanced his understanding of European art as well as of indigenous and colonial Mexican art. Carranza's forces prevailed in the Revolution, and, in 1919, the newly-formed government sent Siqueiros to Europe as a military attaché.

For nearly three years, Siqueiros absorbed Europe's political currents and art, new and old. In Paris, he discussed cubism with Georges Braque and the modern machine age with Fernand Léger, and he studied Paul Cézanne's post-impressionist works. Florence and Rome exposed him to Renaissance Italy's frescoes and humanism. During a brief stay in Barcelona, Siqueiros published a manifesto exhorting artists of the Americas to reject "cute" art and instead embrace their ancestry and "live our amazing dynamic epoch."²⁴

In 1922, Siqueiros returned to Mexico. In his absence, the new Secretary of State for Public Education, José Vasconcelos, had begun commissioning murals as part of his educational and nationalist agenda.²⁵ Siqueiros joined a project at the National Preparatory School, along with Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and others. Siqueiros later reflected on what he and the others learned:

The way we distributed the work was not the only error we made as ardent muralists. . . . Rather, it was defining our theme, a fundamental and extraordinarily important problem. A new thematic concept was a tremendous, new, and immeasurable problem.²⁶

The artists found themselves ill-equipped for the technical complexities of mural painting and for shaping their painting to the crevices and folds of the architecture; but the larger problem was

²³ David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Mi Respuesta: La Historia de Una Insidia*. (Mexico City: Ediciones de "Arte Público," 1960), 15.

²⁴ David Alfaro Siqueiros, "3 Llamamientos de Orientación Actual a los Pintores y Escultores de la Nueva Generación Americana," *Vida Americana*, no. 1 (May 1921): 2–3.

²⁵ Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists*, 21.

²⁶ Siqueiros, *Mi Respuesta*, 22.

how to use the art—ideally situated for mass communication—to produce a politically persuasive statement. These challenges and yet another change in government led to disarray within the muralism effort. At this point, Siqueiros turned to politics and union organizing. Not until late 1930, during his arrest, imprisonment, and confinement to Taxco, did he return to art.

Less than two years later, Siqueiros had his first solo show, a major milestone for any artist. In January 1932, Spain’s ambassador to Mexico, Julio Álvarez del Vayo, whom Siqueiros met while in Europe, sponsored the exhibition in Mexico City.²⁷ It included sixty paintings made of oil on burlap and about fifty prints and drawings, all produced during Siqueiros’s incarceration. Siqueiros biographer Philip Stein noted their impact: “The colors were of the Mexican earth, and the compositions combined a powerful formal construction with a new realism. Works such as *Mine Accident*, *Peasant Mother* and *Proletarian Mother* had a shattering effect in their startling revelation of the modern Mexican human condition.”²⁸ Siqueiros’s regressive style—exaggerated modeling, heavy shadows, and baroque compositions—contributed to the effect. Unfortunately, not only the art world noticed the show. Siqueiros violated his parole by attending the opening, and the Mexican government offered him the options of leaving the country or returning to prison.

Sources differ on Siqueiros’s reasons for choosing to go to the United States rather than return to Europe. Some suggest that Mrs. Nelbert Chouinard invited Siqueiros to teach a fresco class at her art school.²⁹ Years later, Millard Sheets claimed the credit: “In fact, I brought Siqueiros to Chouinard to teach. It was the first time anybody got him in the United States. He’d

²⁷ Raquel Tibol, “David Alfaro Siqueiros en Taxco,” *Artes de México*, no. 5 (April 1995): 78.

²⁸ Stein, *Siqueiros*, 71.

²⁹ Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists*, 145.

been called a Communist and they wouldn't let him in."³⁰ Siqueiros indicated in a 1933 letter that the decision was entirely his, that he was drawn by the United States' industrial sophistication:

I decided to penetrate the United States since it was in this country of large, developed industry where I could make concrete the ideas on the new vehicles of revolutionary plastic production that were germinating in my head. I kept quiet about it . . . so that my intentions wouldn't encounter any obstacles at the border. That is how I got to Los Angeles . . . where I connected with intellectuals affiliated with the Party [in the John Reed Club], with whose help . . . I began to give life to a movement of revolutionary painting.³¹

Both Sheets's and Siqueiros's statements acknowledge the difficulty of getting someone like Siqueiros into the country. The United States was repatriating large numbers of Mexicans and deporting union activists. Siqueiros, imprisoned for his communist radicalism, and relatively unknown as an artist, had no visa when he reached the U.S.-Mexico border in April 1932. One newspaper account of the time noted that Siqueiros had arrived with "no friends, agents or commissions."³² In late 1930, even Diego Rivera, an acclaimed artist with no arrest record, could not gain admittance to the United States without the intervention of his wealthy San Francisco patrons.³³ The specifics of Siqueiros's crossing are hard to pin down. In the most likely scenario, influential Americans he met in Taxco or Mexico City facilitated his entry.

During Siqueiros's seven-month stay in Los Angeles, he plunged into the art scene and participated in Communist Party activities. He organized and produced works for several gallery exhibitions, taught classes, lectured at art clubs and Communist Party events, and judged an Olympic art competition. He also painted three large murals: *América Tropical*, *Mitin Obrero*

³⁰ Millard Sheets, interview by Paul Karlstrom, October 28, 1986, 53, Transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

³¹ Letter from Siqueiros to Comité Central del Partido Comunista del Uruguay, 53.

³² Arthur Millier, "Power Unadorned Marks Olvera Street Fresco: 'Tropical Mexico' Painting by Siqueiros Is Strong Tragic Conception of His Native Land," *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 1932, B16.

³³ Stein, *Siqueiros*, 74.

(*Workers' Meeting*) at the Chouinard School of Art (destroyed), and *Retrato Actual de México* (*Portrait of Mexico Today*) at a private residence (now at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art).

Through his landlady and her family, the Arenals, Siqueiros became involved in Mexican-American life in Los Angeles. Luis Arenal belonged to the Communist Party; he and Siqueiros became life-long friends and colleagues. As Siqueiros connected with Mexican-Americans, he recognized their experiences. Repatriation resulted in displacements similar to those he had witnessed during the Mexican Revolution. The economic stresses of the Depression recalled the poverty of Mexican peasants. At the Plaza, Siqueiros found fellow exiles and veterans of the Mexican Revolution—and an opportunity to confront Los Angeles's powerful on behalf of their city's Mexican-Americans and the proletariat everywhere.³⁴

How Siqueiros came to paint a political challenge on a wall in one of the most contested spaces in Los Angeles remains poorly understood. Laurence Hurlburt recaps the most common version: Siqueiros's first Los Angeles mural, at the Chouinard School of Art, generated publicity that caught the attention of the director of the Plaza Art Center in Italian Hall on Olvera Street.³⁵ The director of the gallery and classroom space, F. K. Frenz, contracted with Siqueiros to paint a mural as part of a class on fresco technique.³⁶ Frenz specified the topic, tropical America, perhaps thinking it unsuitable to revolutionary content. This version of events construes Frenz and his backers as innocent pawns, justifying their shock and, ultimately, exonerating the whitewashing. Further investigation suggests a more complicated story revolving around civic leaders' ambitions for their city. Without question, Frenz and members of Los Angeles's Anglo

³⁴ William D. Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 210.

³⁵ Laurence P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 207–10.

³⁶ Poole and Ball, *El Pueblo*, 62.

cultural and political establishment knew about Siqueiros's past, his politics, and the challenging subjects he addressed in his art. In this light, the whitewashing becomes an act of aggression.

Siqueiros created his controversial image on an exterior second-story wall of Italian Hall. Across the mural's intimidating ninety-foot span, depictions of jungle vegetation connected three vignettes: on the left, a stolid bird-like figure keeping vigil; in the center, a dead man on a double cross, an eagle hovering with talons extended, and the ruins of an exotic pyramid; and on the right, a pair of armed men aiming at the eagle.³⁷ The ancient pyramid's triangular form structures the central space and frames a circle containing the eagle and crucified body. Siqueiros placed the entire scene slightly off-center to accommodate and incorporate apertures in the wall. The cement fresco employed Siqueiros's innovative technique of spraying paint onto wet cement that had been applied directly, with no preparatory layer, to the brick wall. Although Siqueiros later developed a predilection for pyroxylin paint, neither written nor technical evidence can confirm that he employed this type of paint on the Olvera Street mural.³⁸

Analyzing the mural's formal elements and Siqueiros's statements about it reveals the complexity of its confrontational subject matter. Although it includes a call to action against imperialism, it also functions to sanctify Olvera Street and the Plaza. World history, Mexican history, and art history inform every component of the mural, from the stela anchoring the left, to the central vignette's crucifixion, eagle, and ancient ruins, to the two figures crouching on the right. Every detail, including the vegetation, contributes to the meaning. Soon after the unveiling,

³⁷ The Interpretive Center website lists the dimensions at 19.7 x 98.4 feet. Other sources differ; for example, Robin Dunitz's *Street Gallery* lists the dimensions at 18 x 82 feet.

³⁸ F. Piqué, et al., "Original Technique of the Mural *America Tropical* by David Alfaro Siqueiros," *Materials Research Society Symposium Papers* 352, 1995, page 367, clipping in Box 193, Folder 19, Goldman Papers.

Siqueiros explained the significance of the tropical flora in an article called “The Art of the Cement Fresco”:

In our tropics we find strong, terrible, predatory trees, which grow very rapidly and twine their long arms like serpents around anything they can lay hold of. Their coils crush and destroy everything. Often they entwine the splendid ruins of the ancient cities of Mexico, and then we have a great struggle between the trees and stones. This fight, which is very often seen in our country, we have tried to depict. So much for subject.³⁹

In another note at about the same time, a single type-written page titled “América Tropical,” Siqueiros discussed the project more broadly:

Tropical America is the current social tragedy made more acute by the permanent cosmogenic drama of the relentlessness of the tropics.

It is the glimpsed symbol of the indian peon of feudal America, twice crucified by the native exploitive classes and by the oppressive imperialism that followed.

It is the living symbol of the destruction of the former national cultures of America by the invaders of yesterday and today.

It is the preparatory action of the proletariat revolution that ascends the scene and now “breaks open the cartridge” to launch opportunely the [vindicatory] and uplifting battle of a new social order.

It is a plastic organization of absolute courage and because of this an eloquent proof of [how] only work of intrinsic art corresponding to the present moment can be the work of revolutionary conviction.

It is an eloquent example of the superiority of the collective making of art in democratic action over stingy individual intent.

It is the rise of an expressive vehicle that requires large mural painting uncovered, in fresh air, under the sun, under the rain, facing the street, for the masses.

It is the technical anticipation to the art of the immediate future, the art of the new communist society.

³⁹ “The Art of the Cement Fresco by David Alfaro Siqueiros as told to M.J. Spivack,” unpublished manuscript, page 1, n.d. [1935], Box 3, Folder 17, Siqueiros Papers, 1920 -1991, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA. Siqueiros delivered a speech with this title but different content to the Hollywood John Reed Club in September 1932.

Its plastic methodology is a dialectic because it logically [engages] physical or geographic reality with social reality, and objective reality with subjective reality.

The only error stems from its use of the cross because this, even though double, lends itself to an ideological confusion.⁴⁰

Siqueiros had high aspirations for his mural, hoping it would provoke revolutionary action and usher in a new era.

The passion and politics in these descriptions overwhelm Siqueiros's iconographic analysis. Given his training and experience, Siqueiros undoubtedly understood the complex layers of meaning he had painted. In the last line of "América Tropical," Siqueiros called the central figure's resemblance to the crucified Christ an "error." He felt the religious connotation blurred the mural's political message. The scene in fact has a complicated genealogy. *América Tropical's* "indian peon" closely tracks a gruesome picture from Japan's Bakumatsu period that Siqueiros might have seen in Paris. Felice Beato, a British photographer who took the first images of Asia to circulate widely in Europe, produced the image *Executed Sokichi* in 1867 (Figure 3).⁴¹ In addition, the central motif's composition parallels the composition of Masaccio's *Holy Trinity*, a Renaissance fresco that Siqueiros would have seen in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence (Figure 4). The arc of Masaccio's vault repeats in the eagle's wings; God's eyes are replaced by the eagle's; and the vault corbels echo the blocks of the pyramid. Instead of the triangular placement of the figures surrounding Christ in Masaccio's fresco, a Mesoamerican

⁴⁰ "América Tropical," n.p., n.d. [1932], unpublished manuscript in Box 3, Folder 20, Siqueiros Papers. Words in brackets are illegible in the original.

⁴¹ Allen Hockley, "Felice Beato's Japan: Places," *MIT OpenCourseware*, n.d., ocw.mit.edu. Tomás Zurián and Adriana Malvido, "Siqueiros: Hallazgo Iconográfico de América Tropical," *La Jornada*, September 13, 1997, pages 25-26, clipping in Box 3, Folder 18, Luis Garza Papers, 1978-2005, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles. The book in which Zurián and Malvido made the discovery credits Collection Gérard Lévy Paris for the image. The Nagasaki University Library also owns a copy of the photograph. In 2002, the photo was available for internet viewing; it has since been replaced with the following statement: "This image is withheld from public view for some reason." Oldphoto.lb.nagasaki-u.ac.jp.

pyramid structures *América Tropical*. The prominent verticals and horizontals in the *Holy Trinity* subtly appear in *América Tropical* as well. In the central figure, *América Tropical* references two temporally, geographically, and culturally disparate instances of suffering, humiliation, and injustice: Roman persecution of Christ and the Sokichi man's inhumane death.

Similarly, the eagle crosses time, space, and cultures to represent power and empire. Thirty years after the mural's completion, Siqueiros called it the "proud eagle of American currency."⁴² However, the eagles on U.S. coins in 1932 looked nothing like the eagle in the mural, and eagles started to appear on U.S. paper currency only in 1935 (Figure 5).⁴³ The eagle's European iconographic history extends from Ancient Rome's imperial armies to heraldic imagery of the Hapsburgs, who ruled Spain through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to the Napoleonic empire (Figures 6, 7, and 8). Aztec tradition includes eagle warriors and associates an eagle with the founding of the powerful city of Tenochtitlan, where Mexico City now stands. Following the Revolution, the Mexican flag incorporated the Aztec legend with a prominently placed eagle (Figures 9, 10 and 11). Siqueiros may also have associated the eagle with the large bronze version that Harrison Gray Otis had recently installed on his *Los Angeles Times* headquarters.⁴⁴

In the crucifixion and the eagle, the mural symbolizes legacies of imperialism and exploitation. Other elements evoke the rich cultural patrimony of Mexico. The mural's pyramid and ancient relics recall Mesoamerican rituals of human sacrifice. Columnar forms in front of the pyramid resemble Aztec drums, further emphasizing the sense of ritual (Figure 12). The chacmool, gazing out from the left base of the pyramid in the mural, likely received ritual

⁴² Siqueiros, *Mi Respuesta*, 32.

⁴³ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, "The Great Seal of the United States," July 2003, 13.

⁴⁴ Starr, *Inventing the Dream*, 73.

offerings such as human hearts or blood-soaked paper. Two trapezoidal skull racks flanking the eagle represent the Maya and Aztec practice of proudly displaying their war captives and sacrificial victims' heads (Figure 13). The disarray of blocks along the ground and encroaching vegetation highlight the civilizations' ultimate collapse.

Siqueiros suggested the significance of the vegetation in "The Art of the Cement Fresco." Beyond its function connecting the vignettes and demonstrating the jungle's power to overwhelm, the forms of the ceiba tree roots and limbs echo imagery in Maya and pre-Aztec art. The artists of Tenochtitlan depicted their Great Goddess with a sinuous headdress signifying fertility and abundance (Figure 14). The Maya based the World Tree, a sign of the connections between material and spiritual worlds, on the ceiba (Figure 15).⁴⁵ Both of these images morphologically resemble the arteries of the human heart; Mesoamerican cultures favored heart extraction for human sacrifice. The Great Goddess's thick curls and the Maya World Tree may have influenced Mexico's indigenous artists during the colonial period. Similar swirls appear in the churrigueresque architecture of the Parish of Santa Prisca in Taxco (Figure 16). Siqueiros's time in the army and in Taxco offered opportunities for direct exposure to pre-Columbian iconography and to its descendants at Santa Prisca.

Two opposing vignettes bracket the vegetation and central scene. The left features a bird-stela passively looking out, keeping watch, or marking time. The right depicts active resistance: two armed revolutionaries kneel, and one aims his gun at the eagle. Most analyses construe the men as a Mexican and a Peruvian, but the image belies this description. The man in the foreground wears the light shirt and trousers, scarf, and iconic sombrero that identify him as a

⁴⁵ Miller and Taube, *Illustrated Dictionary*, 186.

Mexican *campesino*.⁴⁶ The other man's clothing differs only slightly: he is barefoot and has on a helmet-shaped headdress. The helmet recalls the image of Nezahualcoyotl, a celebrated indigenous king, in the *Codex Ixtlilxochitl* (Figure 17); it also resembles a 1922 Siqueiros sketch titled *Head of a Revolutionary*, presumably a Mexican based on the date (Figure 18).⁴⁷ The clothing locates the man with the sombrero among Mexico's mestizos, of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage, while the man with the helmet belongs to an indigenous group. This interpretation of the figures restores two historically subordinated classes to a place of power and agency.

Beyond the iconography and composition, the mural's color and handling of space add meaning. Although no color photograph of the freshly painted *América Tropical* has survived, traces of paint, archival evidence, and technical analysis permit a limited reconstruction (Figure 19). Browns and oranges accompany the brighter shades of red, green, and yellow that reiterated the primary divisions of the mural.⁴⁸ Red pinned the edges and provided accents through the middle. Green leaves and ochre limbs crisscrossed the length of the mural, and gold highlighted the eagle's wings. Each color recalls other elements of the mural: green and life, red and blood, gold and wealth. In addition, the prominent passages of red and green echo the principal colors in the Mexican flag.

Other than the entwined vegetation and modeled figures, *América Tropical* creates little illusion of space, a contrast to the *Holy Trinity*'s deep vault. *América Tropical* instead takes

⁴⁶ Durán, Conversation with the author.

⁴⁷ Michael D. Coe and Rex Koontz, *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), 231.

⁴⁸ Letter from Goldman to Siqueiros, page 2, November 22, 1968, Box 190, Folder 9, Goldman Papers; F. Piqué, et al., "Original Technique," 368.

advantage of actual space, establishing relationships with its surroundings. The mural's vegetation imagery echoes the Moreton Bay fig trees growing in the nearby Plaza, some of which were planted in 1878 and remain today (Figure 20).⁴⁹ In front of the mural runs the Zanja Madre, Los Angeles's original irrigation system (Figure 21). Though the ditch itself no longer functions, paving across Olvera Street marks its route, and nearby basements offer glimpses of its remnants. The San Gabriel Mountains in the distance form a backdrop for the composition. In Mesoamerican cosmology, the mountain-cave dyad evokes the cycle of death and rebirth. *América Tropical's* pyramid recalls the Mesoamerican practice of constructing a sacred space within an urban setting by placing temples over rulers' tombs.⁵⁰ Considered within its larger setting, *América Tropical* added a sacred Mesoamerican component to the confluence of New Spanish and Anglo cultures in Los Angeles's historical Plaza.

To plan his mural, Siqueiros worked with a photographer to document and study the layout of the wall and its surroundings. The mural's visibility mattered because, as art historian Meyer Schapiro pointed out, a revolutionary mural's impact depends entirely on the people who see it, not on the artist's intention or patrons' interests.⁵¹ Despite interpretations suggesting Siqueiros directed his mural to pedestrians on Olvera Street or passing motorists on Main, no one at street level could see much of *América Tropical*, even when freshly painted. Its second-story position revealed only the men with rifles to people on Olvera Street, the red stela and some tree branches to those on Main Street. Neither viewpoint afforded a glimpse of the central crucifixion (Figure 22). One visitor recalled "climbing those not so stable stairs and getting on the roof" to

⁴⁹ Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza*, 24.

⁵⁰ Miller and Taube, *Illustrated Dictionary*, 56–57, 119–21, 140.

⁵¹ Meyer Schapiro, "The Patrons of Revolutionary Art," *Marxist Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (December 1937): 465.

see the mural in 1932.⁵² Nearby balconies may have provided better sightlines. The best vantage point in Los Angeles, though, was any north-facing office in City Hall (Figure 23).⁵³

In plain sight of the Anglo power apparatus, on a large scale and in bold colors, Siqueiros flung a potent accusation. *América Tropical*'s complex iconography condemns imperialism across time, geography, and cultures, encompassing the Aztec and Maya empires, Spain, Japan, current and former Mexican and U.S. governments, even religious traditions. Siqueiros confirmed this in a 1950s speech: “[O]ur struggle . . . must . . . reach across the continent and around the world. If the problems are universal, so too should the solutions be universal.”⁵⁴ *América Tropical*'s location delivered the message directly to Los Angeles's political heart: City Hall housed the mayor, council chambers, and city administrators who participated in marginalizing Los Angeles's Mexican-Americans.⁵⁵ Dedicated in 1928 as part of the Civic Center urban renewal project, City Hall's phallic structure still towers over downtown. Its “Modern American” architecture symbolizes Anglo ambitions, and the interior juxtaposes Los Angeles with legendary cities like Alexandria, Florence, and Paris.⁵⁶ *América Tropical* fearlessly confronts these aspirations and the paradigms behind them.

The new City Hall constituted one part of Los Angeles's ongoing effort to overcome its provincial reputation. During the 1920s, Chandler and others invested in art, thinking cultural

⁵² Letter from Keats to Goldman, page 1, May 25, 1971, Box 190, Folder 44, Goldman Papers.

⁵³ Trent Sneed, Interpretive Center Docent, Conversation with the author, March 8, 2016. During my visit to the *América Tropical* Interpretive Center, I asked Sneed about the sightlines for the mural, as the literature had made much of the outdoor location's multiple viewing angles. Sneed confirmed what my eyes told me: the mural is hard to see from the street or the surrounding buildings. He mentioned that the twenty-seventh floor observation deck at City Hall offered a great view. That afternoon, I visited City Hall, and *América Tropical* was utterly unmistakable just a few blocks away.

⁵⁴ Siqueiros, *Mi Respuesta*, 137.

⁵⁵ Estrada, *Los Angeles's Olvera Street*, 113–14.

⁵⁶ Los Angeles Conservancy, “Los Angeles City Hall,” April 2016, www.laconservancy.org.

sophistication would encourage urban development, attract upper middle-class residents, and “make the city look good on the world stage.”⁵⁷ In 1932, the approaching Olympics created acute anxiety in Los Angeles over its status as a cultural backwater.⁵⁸ *Los Angeles Times* art critic Arthur Millier noted, “Those suspicious New Yorkers have it all wrong. The Tenth Olympiad is not a deep-d[y]ed scheme to sell Los Angeles Real Estate, but a conspiracy to convert the world to California art.”⁵⁹ At the same time, a “Mexican Arts” exhibition piqued interest in Mexican culture as it traveled across the United States, stopping in fourteen cities between 1930 and 1932.⁶⁰ Perhaps Siqueiros’s patrons thought a mural would bring Los Angeles the attention they craved, or that it would show the world how much they appreciated Mexican culture and innovation in the arts. Since the artist would be working in a part of town uniquely positioned to address Mexican-Americans, one might also hypothesize that they hoped the gesture would subdue political radicalism in the neighborhood.

Yet Siqueiros’s patrons cannot have harbored any illusions about the nature of his politics or his work. Ferenz knew of Siqueiros before the artist arrived in Los Angeles and, in fact, helped introduce him to the city. A naturalized U.S. citizen from Vienna, Ferenz appeared on the Los Angeles art scene in June 1929, as a speaker at the California Art Club; in April 1931 he received mention as the director of the Academy of Modern Art in Los Angeles.⁶¹ Ferenz opened

⁵⁷ Sarah Schrank, “Public Art at the Global Crossroads: The Politics of Place in 1930s Los Angeles,” *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 439.

⁵⁸ Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 30.

⁵⁹ Arthur Millier, “Art ‘Boom’ in Prospect During Olympic Games,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 1932.

⁶⁰ Anna Indyk-López, “Mexican Muralism in the United States: Controversies, Paradoxes, and Publics,” in *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait, and Robin Adèle Greeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 9.

⁶¹ “Symposium Arranged,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 1929; “Art Supervisor Reports Meeting,” *Bakersfield Californian*, April 21, 1931; “Ferenz Once U.S. Soldier,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 1942.

the Plaza Art Center in September 1931, to coincide with La Fiesta de Los Angeles events celebrating the city's sesquicentennial.⁶² For the gallery's inaugural show, Ferez procured the sponsorship of the Mexican consulate and of Jorge Juan Crespo, a former associate of Orozco and Rivera; Christine Sterling attended the opening as a guest of honor.⁶³ The show included a work by Siqueiros. Millier reported, "By D.A. Siqueiros is a single small picture, 'Prisoner's Wife,' which proclaims this artist one of the masters of Mexico. In color and feeling it is unlike anything in the show. It emanates a peculiar distinction."⁶⁴

Plaza Art Center events during 1932 suggest Ferez had, in a few short years, made valuable connections in Los Angeles's art world. Hollywood director and Viennese émigré Joseph von Sternberg lent his name to an opening at the Plaza Art Center in February 1932.⁶⁵ Siqueiros knew von Sternberg and painted his portrait soon after arriving in the United States. The Plaza Art Center took over a show featuring Siqueiros's Taxco work from Los Angeles's renowned Stendahl Gallery when the Stendahl closed on May 31, 1932.⁶⁶

Ferez promoted Siqueiros's art, and, on at least one occasion, his politics. In mid-1932, the Plaza Art Center hosted a meeting of the John Reed Club's Hollywood chapter. The club, founded in New York in 1929, aimed to further Marxist causes and inspire change through art and literature.⁶⁷ The meeting provoked Chandler to admonish Sterling, "[T]his [kind of meeting] is poison and will eventually wreck [Olvera Street]."⁶⁸ Siqueiros became involved in the club

⁶² "Plaza Art Center to Open," *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 1931.

⁶³ Arthur Millier, "Mexican Art Seen at Plaza," *Los Angeles Times*, September 6, 1931; "Mexican Artists' Work Put on Display," *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 1931.

⁶⁴ Millier, "Mexican Art Seen at Plaza."

⁶⁵ Arthur Millier, "Brush Strokes," *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 1932.

⁶⁶ Arthur Millier, "Brush Strokes," *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1932.

⁶⁷ Donald E. Sloan, "'Why Not Revolution?' The John Reed Club and Visual Culture" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2004), 1, 16.

⁶⁸ Poole and Ball, *El Pueblo*, 65. Sterling mentions the letter in her diary.

soon after arriving in Los Angeles, and he made a formal address to the membership in September 1932.

By all accounts, Ferenz executed the contract with Siqueiros and specified the mural's subject, tropical America.⁶⁹ Reflecting on the episode in the 1960s, Siqueiros mocked the theme as an absurd effort to control the mural's content:

The man, like a good Yankee capitalist, had stayed up all night to think of the theme . . . [one] that for him meant a continent of happy men, surrounded by palm trees and parrots (big laugh), and fruit that fell effortlessly into the happy mortals' mouths.⁷⁰

On the other hand, Siqueiros may have deliberately misled Ferenz. The Getty Research Institute houses the only known preliminary sketch of the mural.⁷¹ It shows a pyramid but contains no hint of a crucifix, eagle, revolutionaries, or aggressive vegetation (Figure 24).

As the Plaza Art Center landlord and the manager of Olvera Street, Christine Sterling must have signed off on the project. Sterling may also have sought approval from her board, which included Chandler. Sterling and the board must have seen a chance to raise the profile of Olvera Street with something that had not been done before—an outdoor mural by a Mexican artist with a reputation for innovative techniques. Soon, *California Arts and Architecture* ran an ad calling for students: “Plaza Art Center announces that a fresco by David Alfaro Siqueiros will be painted on one of its outside walls, a limited group of students co-operating on the project. . . . The work is to be started without delay.”⁷² Area manufacturers donated material and equipment,

⁶⁹ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁰ Siqueiros, *Mi Respuesta*, 31–32.

⁷¹ Sketch, n.p., n.d. [1932], Box 2, Folder 26, Siqueiros Papers.

⁷² “Plaza Art Center Ad,” *California Art and Architecture*, August 1932, 5.

as they had for the Olvera Street renovation. Sterling had the relationships necessary to make these requests, further suggesting she took an active role in the effort.⁷³

Although Sterling's board members may not have been familiar with Siqueiros's work, Sterling and Ferez knew exactly what kinds of issues he addressed in his art. Still, the legend surrounding the mural has Siqueiros, alone and unbeknownst to anyone except the lone reporter who stumbled onto the scene, frantically painting the central figure hours before the unveiling. Long after the mural's debut, a John Reed Club member, artist and art critic Grace Clements, alluded to an "original plan" in which "the wounded body of the Peon was placed in the claws of the Eagle." Some in the club had prior knowledge of Siqueiros's intentions.⁷⁴

According to Millier, the crowd at the unveiling "gasp[ed]."⁷⁵ Certainly, the finished mural represented a singular statement—large, outdoors, technically innovative. It could have helped Los Angeles vanquish its provincial cultural reputation. Indeed, a draft press release for the mural's opening boasted, "Once more Easterners will have to admit, much that is new em[a]nates from the West."⁷⁶ Unfortunately, its most obvious reading—armed revolutionaries attacking an American eagle—clashed with Christine Sterling's vision for Olvera Street. Harry Chandler probably found the image particularly distasteful, as he had unpleasant encounters with Mexican radicals at his C-M Ranch during the Mexican Revolution.⁷⁷ Art historian Jeanette

⁷³ Arthur Millier, "Art Sheds 'White Scaffold on Collar': Huge Fresco for El Paseo," *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1932.

⁷⁴ Grace Clements, "Fresco as a Subversive Art," page 6, n.d. [1932], unpublished manuscript in Box 3, Folder 22, Siqueiros Papers.

⁷⁵ Millier, "Power Unadorned."

⁷⁶ "Siqueiros Fresco Unveiled Sunday Night at Plaza Art Center," page 1, n.d. [1932], unpublished manuscript in Box 3, Folder 18, Siqueiros Papers.

⁷⁷ William D. Estrada, "Los Angeles' Old Plaza and Olvera Street: Imagined and Contested Space," *Western Folklore* 58, no. 2 (1999): 127, footnote 10.

Favrot Peterson articulated the problem facing *América Tropical*: “Images do not come with interpretive instructions, but remain open to the varied meanings projected onto them.”⁷⁸

In November 1932, barely a month after finishing *América Tropical*, Siqueiros received a letter denying his request for a visa extension and asking him to leave the country.⁷⁹ He sailed for Buenos Aires in December. The mural remained on view for about seventeen months before being partially destroyed. First went the portion visible from Olvera Street, which Millier mentioned briefly in his March 1934 column: “A week ago fifteen feet of the fresco was whitewashed.”⁸⁰ The remainder survived another five years—a 1938 photograph of Main Street still plainly showed the eagle (Figure 25). By the end of that year, the entire wall had been painted white, obliterating *América Tropical*.⁸¹ The disappearance garnered little attention, and if anyone objected, they left no evidence of it. Artists at the time had no rights under U.S. or California legal doctrine to prevent mutilation or destruction of their work, and besides, Siqueiros had left the country.⁸²

Those responsible for ordering the whitewashing had the experience and power to keep it quiet and to conceal their identities. In the 1970s, Siqueiros accused Ferenz of the defacement: “[He] considered himself betrayed by the theme I had undertaken.”⁸³ It seems unlikely that

⁷⁸ Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe: From Black Madonna to Queen of the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 4.

⁷⁹ Letter from the U.S. Department of Labor, Immigration Service to David Alfaro Siqueiros, n.p., November 15, 1932, copy in Box 3, Folder 18 Garza Papers; and letter to D. Guillermo Spratling from David Alfaro Siqueiros, November 29, 1932, reproduced in Raquel Tibol, *David Alfaro Siqueiros y Su Obra*, pages 194-5, copy in Box 8, Folder 14, Garza Papers.

⁸⁰ Arthur Millier, “Brush Strokes,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1934.

⁸¹ Poole and Ball, *El Pueblo*, 77.

⁸² Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 144. The 1990 Visual Artists’ Rights Act first established these “moral rights” at a federal level. California established protections earlier with the 1979 California Art Preservation Act.

⁸³ Jesús Salvador Treviño, *América Tropical*, VHS (New York: Cinema Guild, 1971).

Ferenz initiated the destruction. Ferenz moved out of Italian Hall in 1932, and the Plaza Art Center disappeared from newspaper accounts. In April 1933, Ferenz surfaced as the director of the “recently organized” Hollywood Art Center.⁸⁴ Sterling, the owner of the property, was the most likely to have requested the whitewashing, perhaps with the encouragement of Olvera Street merchants, city officials, or her board. The 1934 destruction of Rivera’s Rockefeller murals provided a precedent.⁸⁵ On the other hand, as historian William Deverell argues in *Whitewashed Adobe*, Los Angeles liberally practiced whitewashing throughout the city, both literally—covering surfaces with paint—and metaphorically—maintaining Anglo domination over politics and culture. Los Angeles had the opportunity to show the world it welcomed daring cultural statements. Instead, faced with a bold image of injustice and revolution, the city reacted with whitewash. With yet another instance of heavy-handed repression of radicalism and Mexican culture, the political and cultural establishment fully validated their provincial reputation.

While the politically powerful shunned the work, Los Angeles’s Mexican-Americans seem not to have commented on the mural or its whitewashing. Admittedly, accessing Spanish-language press from the period remains a challenge, so sources of information on this point are few. The leading paper, *La Opinion*, ran a short article on October 9, 1932 mentioning the upcoming unveiling but focused on Siqueiros’s precarious immigration status.⁸⁶ This article seems to be *La Opinion*’s only coverage of Siqueiros’s visit. Indeed, in the three-year press run

⁸⁴ Poole and Ball, *El Pueblo*, 79; Katherine Von Blon, “Pirandello and Shaw to Be Mimicked,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 1933. In the following years, Ferenz published an obscure book on Hitler and faced prosecution for pro-German activities. Attorney General Earl Warren prosecuted the case. “Noble Aide Says Father Nazi Leader,” *Oakland Tribune*, April 29, 1942.

⁸⁵ “Lenin Mural Destroyed,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1934.

⁸⁶ “Amenezaron a Siqueiros con la Expulsion: El pintor mexicano de vanguardia, en dificultades con Migración,” *La Opinion*, October 9, 1932.

covering 1930 through 1932, the paper rarely devoted space to happenings near the Plaza other than immigration raids and demonstrations. The absence of commentary may reflect an unwillingness or inability to share opinions about the mural openly. Some Olvera Street merchants marketed their businesses with the romantic version of the Mexican past, but no record remains of their objections, if any.⁸⁷ The silence may also indicate indifference. After all, few Mexican-Americans participated in the project. Siqueiros worked with a corps of about twenty students who, based on their surnames, represented a range of ethnicities.⁸⁸ Only one, his friend Luis Arenal, clearly came from the Mexican-American community. In addition, people in the immediate neighborhood had restricted views of the mural, especially the controversial central figure. On the other hand, the workers, union organizers, communists, and others walking down Olvera Street could see the revolutionaries and grasp the meaning of their postures. They would identify with the battle against City Hall.

In contrast, Los Angeles's art community responded effusively, recognizing the mural's innovative approach and powerful content. In the *Illustrated Daily News*, critic Dan Ryan extolled the "sculptured mass of color [and] depth of modeling," that "miles away . . . still possesses and commands." He called Siqueiros "dangerous to all the fussy, pussyfooting old second-hand dealers in life, as well as art."⁸⁹ Millier, a generally conservative critic, applauded the mural as "a work that first arrests and then holds the mind through the strength and simplicity of its forms." He saw the mural's challenge to Los Angeles's romanticized Mexican past: "In the

⁸⁷ Kropp, "Citizens of the Past," 48.

⁸⁸ The artists were Jean Abel, Luis Arenal, J. Asanger, Victor Hugo Basinet, F.H. Bowers, Dean Cornwell, Dorothy Groton, W. D. Hackney, Arthur Hinchman, Murray Hantman, Wiard Boppo Ihnen, Harold H. Jones, John Kehoe, Richard Kollorsz, R. Kadish, Myer Shaffer, Martin Obzina, Sanford Pollock, Tony Reveles, Ivan Stoppe, Jeannette Summers, Wolo von Trutzschler and John Weiskal. "Siqueiros Fresco Unveiled Sunday Night," page 2.

⁸⁹ Dan Ryan, "Parade Ground," *Illustrated Daily News*, October 11, 1932.

midst of our popular conception of Mexico as a land of eternal dancing, gayety and light-headedness, this stern, strong, tragic work unrolls its painted cement surface.”⁹⁰ Three years later, perhaps under pressure from his employers, Millier recanted, arguing that personal convictions were unsuitable in public murals.⁹¹ Film director Seymour Stern admired the work’s bravura: “The art is not as great as the courage and audacity of its maker, to [create a mural like *América Tropical*] in one of the most conservative asylums of bourgeois art.”⁹² Artist Lorser Feitelson said, “The reaction in the art world to the Olvera Street mural was 100% wonderful [Siqueiros] brought tenebrism . . . , illusionism, and also this architectonic quality; [*América Tropical*] had guts in it! It made everything else look like candybox illustrations.”⁹³

Although artists and critics appreciated the work, the whitewashers prevailed. *América Tropical* effectively disappeared from the popular press, art journals, and scholarly works for forty years. Siqueiros returned briefly to the United States in 1934 and 1936, when he established an influential Experimental Workshop in New York. He joined the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War, went back to Mexico and was expelled again, traveled throughout Latin America, and eventually settled in Mexico. Los Angeles would not remember his impact until Chicano artists and activists realized what had happened to *América Tropical*’s unequivocal challenge to power that Siqueiros placed on a wall on Olvera Street, facing City Hall.

⁹⁰ Millier, “Power Unadorned,” B20.

⁹¹ Arthur Millier, “Mural Rows Due to Artists’ Failure to Understand Job,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 1935.

⁹² Seymour Stern, “Siqueiros,” in *Vida y Obra de David Alfaro Siqueiros: Juicios Críticos*, ed. Ruth Solís (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1975), 35.

⁹³ Transcript of Goldman interview with Lorser Feitelson, pages 2-3, July 20, 1973, Box 191, Folder 31, Goldman Papers.

América Tropical: Myth

On November 4, 1968, in an excited letter to her long-time friend Josefina Quezada, Shifra Goldman reported, “A very interesting development is taking place in Los Angeles. . . . After over 35 years, we find that [*América Tropical*] is beginning to show through the paint with which it was covered in 1932.”⁹⁴ She asked Quezada how to get in touch with Siqueiros. A few weeks later, Goldman alerted Siqueiros, closing the letter with the reason for her excitement:

Further, there is developing in the Mexican community in Los Angeles a new militancy and self-affirmation with demands for improvement of living conditions, education, etc. The mural is just as timely today as when it was painted, and the community (the “barrio” as we call it here) is very anxious to have its inspiration available to all.⁹⁵

Goldman alluded to Los Angeles’s Chicano movement, which would soon embrace Siqueiros’s mural as a reflection of Chicano realities and aspirations. For a community working to recover its heritage from repeated efforts to erase or romanticize it, *América Tropical*’s destruction and resurrection became a potent metaphor. As the *barrio* looked for new symbols of strength and pride, *América Tropical* emerged as an icon in its own right. Eventually, Chicanos would resurrect *América Tropical*.

During the four decades that *América Tropical* lay under its blanket of whitewash, Los Angeles grew and prospered. The region emerged from the Depression as World War II placed heavy demand on its food-processing, textile, oil, aeronautics, and automotive manufacturing

⁹⁴ Letter from Goldman to Quezada, November 4, 1968, Box 190, Folder 49, Goldman Papers. Goldman had not yet researched the dates of the mural’s whitewashing.

⁹⁵ Letter from Goldman to Siqueiros, page 2, November 22, 1968.

industries. The Harrison Gray Otis and Harry Chandler-led oligarchy continued to run the city, holding tightly to power and keeping the city safe for provincialism.⁹⁶ Émigré artists fleeing turmoil in Europe did not have the impact on the visual arts in Los Angeles that they had on New York, although they significantly influenced film and classical music on the West Coast.

The Mexican-American population achieved some measure of economic justice and political participation during the period. Mexican-American union activities became more frequent and more successful during the 1930s.⁹⁷ Mexican-American veterans returned from World War II with marketable skills. Long-time residents more effectively participated in the Anglo political system and applied pressure from outside it. In 1949, the Community Service Organization (CSO) helped elect Edward Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council, the first Mexican-American in the twentieth century to assume a leadership role in city government. In addition, the CSO, including two young activists named César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, worked on issues like housing discrimination, police brutality, and school segregation. The organization registered voters and helped Mexican-Americans navigate municipal bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, Mexican-Americans continued to encounter significant obstacles rooted in racism. For example, in 1957, the city displaced residents of the Chávez Ravine neighborhood to accommodate the Dodgers baseball team, soon to arrive from Brooklyn. Education and good jobs remained elusive. Artist Sergio O'Cadiz recalled the discrimination he encountered in Los

⁹⁶ Philip J. Ethington, "Ab Urbs Condita: Regional Regimes since 13,000 Before Present," in *A Companion to Los Angeles*, ed. William Francis Deverell and Greg Hise (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 195, 204.

⁹⁷ For more on the developments among Los Angeles's Mexican-American population and the Chicano movement, see Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (Boston: Longman, 2011); Ernesto Chávez, "Mi Raza primero!" (*My People First!*): *Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Mario T. García and Sal Castro, *Blowout!: Sal Castro and the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*; Zaragosa Vargas, *Crucible of Struggle: A History of Mexican Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Angeles in the 1960s: “[In] a society where an old building was built 10 years ago, . . . all anybody could think of was ‘My God! He doesn't speak English!’ . . . What used to be my values were suddenly invalidated. I had a good education, good manners—they meant nothing.”⁹⁸

In the mid-1960s, frustrations across the United States coalesced into the Chicano movement. Mexican-Americans in cities from Chicago to El Paso to Los Angeles tried a variety of strategies and tactics to increase Mexican-American empowerment. Among the movement's earliest actions, César Chávez and Dolores Huerta began organizing farm workers in the late 1950s to address migrant labor conditions in Southern California; in 1966 they joined forces with Filipino farm workers to form the United Farm Workers (UFW). In Denver, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales focused on judicial and police reform; in New Mexico, Reies López Tijerina pursued land rights; in Texas, activists fought for political representation. High school students in Los Angeles staged classroom boycotts, the Blowouts, to demand better education.

Following Chávez's example, organizers of the Blowout and other protests planned non-violent demonstrations; but, more than once, police overreaction resulted in property damage, injuries, and death. An August 1970 Chicano march protesting the Vietnam War, known as the Moratorium, provoked a particularly brutal response by Los Angeles law enforcement. Those killed included Ruben Salazar, a respected journalist, who became a martyr in the Chicano community. Politicians like District Attorney Evelle Younger aggravated tensions. While running for reelection on a law-and-order platform, Younger brought charges against thirteen people associated with the Blowouts. The brief imprisonment and long road to exoneration for the East L.A. 13 further mobilized the Chicano community. Law enforcement's heavy hand led

⁹⁸ Gustavo Arellano, “Sergio O’Cadiz: El Artist,” *OC Weekly*, October 4, 2012, www.ocweekly.com.

the movement to develop a militant arm, in the same way police brutality had inflamed radicalism in the 1920s and 1930s.

In parallel with strikes, protests, and political action, Chicano activists sought to build a stronger sense of ethnic pride to counteract Anglo projects to repress and romanticize Los Angeles's Mexican-Americans. In the schools, where curricula ignored Mexican heritage, activists made quiet changes as well as calls for broader reforms. Sal Castro, a high-school teacher and organizer of the Blowouts recalled, "At no time did [teachers] think they were hurting the kids by concentrating only on white history. Never did they consider talking about other things, other accomplishments that might better connect with the students."⁹⁹ To build students' esteem, Castro brought indigenous, Mexican, and Mexican-American history to his classroom, giving particular attention to the groups' economic and cultural contributions. After the Blowouts, the Chicano community demanded, among other improvements, that "Textbooks and curriculum should be revised to show Mexican contributions to society, to show injustices they have suffered, and to concentrate on Mexican folklore."¹⁰⁰ The matter of invisible heritage persisted at the college level. Artist Eduardo Carrillo remembered that "My own education in the 1960s at the University of California, there weren't any courses in Mexican art history, there weren't any, much less in Chicano art. This bothered me somewhat because here was this tremendous heritage that I didn't know anything about."¹⁰¹

From the beginning of the Chicano movement, activists recognized the power of the arts. In 1965, Teatro Campesino grew out of the UFW to teach history, publicize strikes, and motivate

⁹⁹ García and Castro, *Blowout!*, 116.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁰¹ Eduardo Carrillo, interview by Philip Brookman, April 17, 1982, CEMA 64, Califas: Chicano Art and Culture in California Collection.

farmworkers. The UFW published *El Malcriado: The Voice for the Farmworker* starting in 1964. It featured prints by Mexican satirist José Guadalupe Posada, famous for his distinctive skeleton figures called *calaveras*, and by the Mexican art collective Taller de Gráfica Popular. *El Malcriado* represented many Chicanos' first exposure to Mexican social protest art.¹⁰²

While theater, newspapers, and magazines circulated Chicano art to people involved in the movement, audiences outside the movement were harder to reach. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Los Angeles-area galleries and museums rarely exhibited works by Chicano artists. Chicanos took matters into their own hands and established dedicated galleries. Three galleries that opened in 1969 played a role in *América Tropical's* preservation. The Mechicano Gallery had a brief life bringing Chicano Art to Los Angeles's gallery row on La Cienega Boulevard before relocating to Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles. The more commercial Goez Gallery on East First Street had an extension on Olvera Street for a short time. A former union activist, Frank López, directed Plaza de la Raza, a community center and exhibition space in Lincoln Park.¹⁰³ Chicano artists also made more militant demands for recognition from the Los Angeles art establishment. For example, in 1972, the Chicano art group Asco sprayed graffiti on the exterior walls of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) to call attention to the museum's failure to acknowledge Chicano art. In an echo of the establishment's reaction to *América Tropical*, the museum whitewashed the tag within a day.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Goldman and Ybarra-Frausto, *Arte Chicano*, 34.

¹⁰³ Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait, and Robin Adèle Greeley, eds., "Chronology," in *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 308.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, eds., *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991), 104.

Even after conventional galleries and museums began to show Chicano art, some questioned whether these exhibitions indicated real progress. José Montoya of the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF) commented on a show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art:

In the past the big museums have been reluctant to exhibit Raza artists because, according to curators, their works were steeped in ethnic politics, thus devoid of aesthetic significance. . . . [I]t is not news . . . that aesthetics has been used as a tool of racism by Anglo curators, critics and art historians. Now, it seems, they are opening their doors. Their minds, by and large, remain closed.¹⁰⁵

Critics did not help. Peter Plagens briefly mentioned *América Tropical* and published a photograph of the central scene in his *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970*.

Although Plagens was one of the first since the whitewashing to acknowledge Siqueiros's mural, he included it to provide historical context as an example of leftist art. The rest of *Sunshine Muse* makes no reference to art by or for the Mexican-American community. Another critic, Richard Cándida Smith, asserted in the opening to *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* that California artists in the 1960s and 1970s mobilized ethnic, gender, and sexual stereotypes to subvert and disrupt existing hierarchies—the agenda of Chicano artists. He nevertheless wrote all fifteen chapters of the book without introducing a single Chicano or Mexican-American artist or art work. Art historian Jacinto Quirarte began documenting Chicano contributions to twentieth century art in his 1973 *Mexican American Artists*, because, he says, “[H]ere was a largely untapped body of material, precisely because attitudes governing the selection of material for art historical study had led to its exclusion.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ José Montoya, “Rupert Garcia at the S.F. Museum of Modern Art,” page 1, c. 1978, unpublished manuscript in Box 2, Folder 14, José Montoya Papers, CEMA 20, Department of Special Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.

¹⁰⁶ Jacinto Quirarte, *Mexican American Artists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), xv.

Chicano artists turned to murals, a relatively out-of-favor art form, to propagate Chicano culture. During the Depression, the Mexican mural program had prompted the United States to develop large-scale, publicly funded mural projects as part of the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). By the 1950s, the legacies of the WPA and the Mexican Revolution tainted murals with socialist associations. In addition, murals deviated from currents propelling the U.S. art scene. Abstract expressionism, minimalism, conceptual art, and assemblage engrossed artists, critics, galleries, and museums. Murals began to reappear in the late 1960s, with works like William Walker's 1967 *The Wall of Respect* in Chicago. In Los Angeles, Terry Schoonhoven and Victor Henderson's L. A. Fine Arts Squad painted surrealist, trompe l'oeil street murals between 1969 and 1974. In murals, Chicanos saw an opportunity to claim and transform their neighborhoods with a shared narrative that deployed "strategic ethnicity," incorporating Mexican-American heroes and martyrs, struggles and triumphs to reach out to and help mobilize the community.¹⁰⁷ Murals soon became the most recognizable Chicano art form.¹⁰⁸

Although murals offered the opportunity to spread a message widely, executing them presented serious difficulties. Obstacles included the expense of materials and scaffolding for a large area and perhaps overseeing a crew with no skills and little commitment to the project.

Chicano artist Malaquías Montoya elaborated on the complications:

[To become] visual aids of the Chicano movement of course the first thing that came to us was that we would become muralists. Because we knew that . . . it

¹⁰⁷ Marc Simon Rodriguez, *American Social and Political Movements of the 20th Century: Rethinking the Chicano Movement* (Florence, GB: Routledge, 2014), 139–40.

¹⁰⁸ The Chicano mural phenomenon overlaps with street murals and community murals. Chicano murals may appear on streets or indoors, and their creators may be a solo artist or involve the community. However, for my purposes, a mural qualifies as a Chicano mural only if the artist(s) self-identifies as a Chicano and the mural incorporates content relevant to the Chicano movement.

would reach a helluva lot of people. But at that time murals were not accepted and you just couldn't walk up and say, "Hey, let me paint on your wall."¹⁰⁹

In another interview, Montoya described the need to make an appealing image:

[Y]ou have every right to walk down the street. Undisturbed. But, then all of a sudden there's a poster, and to me that's really a challenge, because that poster, that mural, has to be so artistically well-done that you do not reject it. That you stop, that you . . . appreciate it, and at the same time . . . you're reading whatever's on there, because I might be saying something very offensive.¹¹⁰

Montoya's statement reflects the recognition that mural projects allowed groups with little economic or political power—not just Chicanos—to challenge their invisibility. Despite the production obstacles, Chicano artists, shut out of mass media and the mainstream art world, felt an imperative to communicate.

To capture the Chicano experience, declare their presence, and mark their territory, muralists relied on accessible iconography that would be legible within the neighborhood and to visitors. Art historian Tomás Ybarra-Frausto cites the home, the street, and the community as sources of imagery, along with Mexican history and Mesoamerican mythology.¹¹¹ The smiling grandmother with a welcoming embrace in Judy Baca and Las Vistas Nuevas' 1971 *Mi Abuelita* (*My Grandmother*) embodies the warmth and security of the Mexican-American family (Figure 26). *Chicano History*, painted by Eduardo Carrillo, Ramses Noriega, Saul Solache, and Sergio Hernández in 1970, presents a complex narrative of violence and redemption (Figure 27). On the right side, an eagle draws blood from a light-skinned figure with a *calavera* head wearing a bishop's miter. A dark-skinned man in working-class clothing lies dead at the bottom center;

¹⁰⁹ Malaquías Montoya, interview by Philip Brookman, November 6, 1983, Califas: Chicano Art and Culture in California Collection.

¹¹⁰ Transcript of interview with Malaquías Montoya, page 7, 1977, Box 1, Folder 11, Chicano Art Movement Collection, CEMA 37, Department of Special Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.

¹¹¹ Thomas Ybarra-Frausto, "Foreword," in *Give Me Life: Iconography and Identity in East LA Murals*, by Holly Barnet-Sánchez and Tim Drescher (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016), xiii–xiv.

above him, a winged figure evoking the Mesoamerican god Quetzalcoatl rises from a burning cemetery. An armed indigenous figure gazes on the scene from the left. *Chicano History's* saturated colors and aggressive content vividly contrast with official versions of Los Angeles history like Dean Cornwell's *Great Eras of California History* murals at the Los Angeles Central Library (Figure 28).

Artists often incorporated time-honored symbols into murals. One of the earliest and most enduring Chicano images, the Virgin of Guadalupe, demonstrates how such iconography served the movement. The legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe holds that, in 1531, the Virgin appeared to an indigenous man at a site in Mexico holy to pre-Columbian cultures. She spoke to him in Nahuatl, the Aztec language. The man told the bishop, who did not believe the story, whereupon the Virgin appeared again and miraculously produced roses. When the man presented the roses to the bishop, the image of the Virgin appeared on the man's cloak, and the bishop acknowledged the divine event. During the Mexican colonial period, the legend and its depictions served to validate Mexico's mestizo culture, marking it as equal to that of Spain. The Virgin of Guadalupe became a protector of Mexico, frequently portrayed in art (Figure 29). By embracing the image, Chicanos asserted the importance of their heritage as well as their rights to equality and protection. The components of the legend—a miraculous appearance, dismissal by the powerful, and ultimate redemption—recur in the story of *América Tropical*.

On an epic scale, muralists produced images relevant to the Chicano. In Willie Herrón III's forceful *The Wall that Cracked Open* (1972), a composition resembling a tropical tree merges with the surrounding streetscape. A praying woman, fighting men, and an exploding head press forward from a fissure in the wall (Figure 30). A part-Mesoamerican, part-*calavera* head separates vignettes of barrio life in the top half of the mural from the black void (underworld) in

the lower part. Born out of the grief and anger that followed a near-fatal gang-related assault on Herrón's brother, *The Wall* respects the neighborhood gangs by incorporating their graffiti. Graffiti is another way the invisible mark their presence, and, as the case of Asco at LACMA demonstrated, it is also often whitewashed. Like *América Tropical*, *The Wall* recalls elements of Mesoamerican cosmology, including the Maya World Tree's connections between material and spiritual worlds and the cycle of death and rebirth in the mountain-cave dyad. Moreover, the sense of something that needs to come out of the wall parallels *América Tropical* emerging from its whitewash. *The Wall that Cracked Open* gave the Chicano community a clear, meaningful image. At the same time, it raised issues that surfaced in the story and iconography of *América Tropical*.

Shifra Goldman's 1968 discovery of *América Tropical*'s tangled trees, crucified peon, attacking eagle, and armed revolutionaries pushing through the rotting whitewash could not have happened at better time. Chicano artists and activists could, with some effort, see the mural in person. They would immediately recognize the forms and sense the connections to Chicano iconography. An observant passer-by on Main or Olvera Street could glimpse Siqueiros's bold strokes through the rotting topcoat (Figure 31). From the City Hall observation deck, a visitor with a pair of binoculars could see the entire mural. In 1968, the Italian Hall stood empty and no stairs led from the street to the roof, but photographs show people climbing through the window to the left of the crucified peon to reach the rooftop for close-up views.

Shifra Goldman was among those who crawled through the window to see *América Tropical*. Goldman deserves a great deal of credit for the effort to recover the mural, one of her many projects on behalf of Chicano causes. She received her doctorate in art history from UCLA

in 1977 and taught at East Los Angeles College, UCLA, and other area institutions.¹¹² She published extensively on Chicano art history, as her compiled essays in *Dimensions of the Americas* testify. Goldman used her relationships in the Chicano community to publicize *América Tropical*'s reappearance. Among other projects, she participated in the Educational Issues Coordinating Committee (EICC), created after the Blowouts to follow up on promises for reform. There she met a young filmmaker, Jesús Treviño, looking for an idea for a documentary.

Treviño saw in the story of Siqueiros's mural a motivational tale for Chicanos.¹¹³ He persuaded Los Angeles's public broadcast station, KCET, to fund the documentary, which he titled *América Tropical*. The film interweaves images of the mural with footage of the chaos following the Moratorium march. Treviño equates the violence inflicted on the Chicano community to the mural's whitewashing.¹¹⁴ In one of the concluding scenes, artist Gilbert Luján observed that the story of *América Tropical* resembled the censorship that Chicanos continued to experience in the early 1970s. Nearly forty years after destroying *América Tropical* and its powerful symbols, Los Angeles iconoclasts provoked the activism they had intended to defuse.¹¹⁵

Shortly after Treviño's *América Tropical* aired in 1971 on KCET, the Los Angeles-based Chicano literary magazine *Con Safos* published an article on the mural. The article ran an image of the entire mural and a close-up of the executed peon. It opened with Siqueiros's "creds":

[Siqueiros's] life has been a series of revolutionary actions against tyranny and oppression, [he] fought both in the 1910 Mexican Revolution and in Spain against

¹¹² Elaine Woo, "Shifra Goldman Dies at 85; Champion of Modern Mexican Art," *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 2011, www.latimes.com.

¹¹³ Jesús Salvador Treviño, *Eyewitness: A Filmmaker's Memoir of the Chicano Movement* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2001), 208.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 209–10, 222.

¹¹⁵ Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, 13, 29, 94.

Franco, [he] has served several jail sentences for his Communist beliefs and [his] paintings reflect his passion for justice and human values.¹¹⁶

The editors and graphic contributors of *Con Safos* included “Bob” Gronk and the members of Chicano art collective “Los Four:” Luján, Robert de la Rocha, Frank Romero, and Carlos Almaraz.¹¹⁷

Both Treviño’s film and the *Con Safos* article emphasize the mythic aspects of *América Tropical* and its artist. The mural and its story perfectly fit the Chicano movement’s needs. It featured a hero who took a bold stand against the powerful, was suppressed, and rose again. Siqueiros, a bona fide soldier in the Mexican Revolution, had been jailed—twice—for his actions on behalf of the oppressed. He had the guts to place an explicit message in full view of City Hall. Chicanos could recognize the threatening eagle and identify with the crucified peon and the armed revolutionaries. Mesoamerican iconography celebrated a heritage Chicanos longed to reclaim. The mural’s initial shout and its silencing connected with the experiences of Chicano artists and activists. The contrast between the Chicano response to *América Tropical*’s reappearance and the near-silence from the Mexican-American community upon the unveiling in 1932 reflected the community’s growing sense of ethnic identity and pride. Over the next several decades, the Chicano community would memorialize the mythology of *América Tropical*.

¹¹⁶ “Viva Siqueiros,” *Con Safos*, Winter 1971, 26-27, Box 236, Folder 1, Goldman Papers. Unfortunately, the image of the full mural was reversed in reproduction.

¹¹⁷ The *Con Safos* masthead lists the artist better known as Gronk as Bob Gronk, possibly as an inside joke.

América Tropical: Memory

Like the Xipe Totec and the Virgin of Guadalupe narratives, the story of *América Tropical* passed into legend, a means of transmitting Chicano cultural values. The Chicano community developed an iconography to evoke *América Tropical* and periodically celebrated it in murals. However, *América Tropical* did not endure only in Chicano murals. Chicano activists worked for over forty years to bring the remains of the mural itself back to life.

Within just a few years of Treviño's documentary, the first known reference to *América Tropical* appeared in a Chicano mural. In 1974, Sergio O'Cadiz, working with Chicano students at Santa Ana College, incorporated the crucified peon in *History and Evolution of the Chicano in the United States* (Figure 32, based on preliminary sketch). Barbara Carrasco's 1981-83 *History of Los Angeles, A Mexican Perspective* also includes a small but clear reproduction of the peon (Figure 33). The city of Los Angeles commissioned Carrasco's mural for the 1984 Olympics but deemed it too controversial to display. Carrasco, outraged, collaborated on a documentary, *Whitewash*, that drew parallels between her mural's fate and that of *América Tropical*. A publicity flyer for the film fumed, "Because of the controversy it caused, the mural was banned and never exhibited. For a year the mural has been stacked, hidden in East Los Angeles, so it would not be destroyed."¹¹⁸ Both Carrasco and O'Cadiz cited the crucified peon, the most distinctive and expressive element of *América Tropical*; however, the choice foregrounds the oppressed victim over the active resistance of the mestizo and indigenous revolutionaries.

¹¹⁸ *Whitewash* flyer, c. 1984, Box 28, Folder 2, Goldman Papers.

Eva Cockroft incorporated both *América Tropical* and its whitewashing in her last mural, *Homage to Siqueiros* (with Alessandra Moctezuma, 1998, Figure 34). On the second-story of a Self Help Graphics building, it conveyed the story of the Siqueiros mural at a time when the original remained out of sight.¹¹⁹ John Zender Estrada's *Homage to Mexican Masters*, painted in 2003, places the eagle and the peon's head like a crown, or a halo, over Siqueiros's face (Figure 35). In 2012, to celebrate the newly unveiled remnants of *América Tropical*, a coalition of Chicano artists, Willie Herrón among them, painted *La Voz de la Gente, La Resurrección de Cuauhtémoc en las Américas: Homenaje a David Alfaró Siqueiros* (*The People's Voice, Cuauhtémoc's Resurrection in the Americas: Homage to David Alfaró Siqueiros*, Figure 36). The mural incorporates a clip from *Portrait of Mexico Today*, and once again, the crucified peon and eagle represent *América Tropical*.

As Chicano artists acknowledged and sustained the story of *América Tropical*, others engaged in a decades-long fight to preserve the original. Activist and photographer Luis C. Garza believes that deeply ingrained disrespect for the mural at City Hall caused much of the delay in the conservation project.¹²⁰ The *Los Angeles Times* in 2002 attributed the project's glacial progress to a lack of cash and political clout.¹²¹ As late as 2004, the Getty Conservation Institute threatened to pull out of the project if the city failed to raise needed funds.¹²²

In truth, the preservation project ran into familiar obstacles: competing visions, conflicting priorities, and change within the sponsoring institutions. In addition, technical

¹¹⁹ "Homage to Siqueiros," *Mural Locator*, November 3, 2010, murallocator.org; Myrna Oliver, "Eva Cockroft; Venice Muralist Who Used Art to Explore Social Themes," *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 1999, www.latimes.com.

¹²⁰ Luis Garza, Conversation with the author, March 8, 2016.

¹²¹ Suzanne Muchnic, "Siqueiros' 'America Tropical': A Tangled Tale of Conservation," *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 2002, www.latimes.com.

¹²² Augustin Gurza, "Mural's Lasting Morass," *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 2004, www.latimes.com.

challenges surpassed all expectations. Still, the Chicano community persisted, using lessons learned in other parts of the movement—working within the system, patiently campaigning, building coalitions—to prevail. The impasse broke only when the pressure from the community finally found willing politicians and institutions like the Getty. In Garza’s view, this happened as a result of changing politics in Los Angeles and a growing recognition that the city’s diversity could be a source of strength.¹²³ Ultimately, an extensive collaboration between Anglo art patrons and the Mexican-American community, between Los Angeles’s political leadership and its artists, preserved the mural *and* its history. In 2012, accompanied by an exhibition explaining its making and destruction, the remains of *América Tropical* returned to public view on the eightieth anniversary of its initial unveiling.

Shifra Goldman spearheaded initial efforts to resurrect the mural. Soon after her 1968 discovery, she procured Siqueiros’s permission and help to restore the mural. Siqueiros later insisted on preservation instead of restoration, on the grounds that restoration would undermine the significance of the work’s destruction.¹²⁴ Siqueiros recommended two conservators who could inspect the mural and provide an estimate for its restoration, Jaime Mejia and Josefina Quezada, “whom he had known for quite some time.”¹²⁵ Goldman worked every angle she could think of to raise the money for their visit. She visited Minna Coe who, at the time, owned Siqueiros’s *Portrait of Mexico Today* mural; spoke to a studio, Mentor Films; and considered approaching the Mexican Consulate.¹²⁶ Goldman and Quezada plotted to raise funds with a

¹²³ Garza, Conversation with the author.

¹²⁴ Sneed, Conversation with the author.

¹²⁵ Letter from Siqueiros, June 26, 1969, Box 190, Folder 47, Goldman Papers.

¹²⁶ Letter from Goldman to Quezada, July 17, 1969, Box 190, Folder 47, Goldman Papers.

reproduction of *América Tropical* that could “sell in the U.S. for \$5.00 or \$10.00.”¹²⁷ Ultimately, KCET paid for the trip as part of the budget for Treviño’s *América Tropical* documentary.¹²⁸ Jaime Mejia later reported that the mural’s state at the time of his visit remained surprisingly sound: “In spite of the adverse conditions to which the mural has been exposed, its pictorial layer was still in good condition, and it was possible to appreciate many details of the work.”¹²⁹

While conservators assessed the mural’s condition, news of the reemergence spread. During the early 1970s, various groups advanced ideas for the mural’s future. Goldman organized a Siqueiros Mural Committee, which included LACMA staff members and Beverly Hills socialites as well as the directors of three Chicano galleries, Leonard Castellanos of the Mechicano Gallery, Joe González from the Goez Gallery, and the Plaza de la Raza’s Frank López.¹³⁰ Goldman told Siqueiros that “the gentlemen of Olvera Street have excellent plans to restore the mural, to build a walk-way out on the roof so people can view the mural.”¹³¹ However, Jean Bruce Poole, a curator with El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, reported that Olvera Street management and some merchants resisted a restoration project because they felt the mural did not fit in with the character of Olvera Street.¹³²

LACMA had still other plans for the mural. In 1970, LACMA staff member Rexford Stead wrote Goldman to say that the mural was “almost unredeemable.” He disparaged the idea of restoration or conservation in favor of a replica.¹³³ Goldman forwarded the letter to Siqueiros,

¹²⁷ Letter from Goldman to Quezada, page 2, September 17, 1969, Box 190, Folder 46, Goldman Papers.

¹²⁸ Treviño, *Eyewitness*, 213.

¹²⁹ Jaime Mejia, “Proyecto de Conservación del Mural ‘América Tropical’,” page 3, February 1979, unpublished manuscript in Box 190, Folder 4, Goldman Papers.

¹³⁰ Siqueiros Mural Committee Roster, n.d., Box 191, Folder 1, Goldman Papers. The same group also seems to have used the name Save the Mural Committee.

¹³¹ Letter from Goldman to Siqueiros, page 2, November 22, 1968.

¹³² Poole and Ball, *El Pueblo*, 90–91.

¹³³ Letter from Rexford Stead to Goldman, August 31, 1970, Box 190, Folder 46, Goldman Papers.

protesting: “The interest in having the mural restored is very much alive in the community, and I do not consider the opinions given in [LACMA’s] letter to be final.” She added, “[I]n my opinion, the letter and the visit to the mural are in direct response to the growing militancy of the Mexican community in Los Angeles.”¹³⁴

A February 1971 earthquake damaged Italian Hall and the mural. Goldman worried that Italian Hall would be torn down, so her committee came up with a contingency plan: “Thought was even given to dismantling the brick wall stone by stone and rebuilding it at the Plaza de la Raza.”¹³⁵ In a letter to Mejia, Goldman said that Olvera Street management had become uncooperative and was “very evasive when it came to the permission and promise to inform us if the building was to be destroyed, and give us an opportunity to remove the wall.” With relief, she added that the decision had been made not to raze the building.¹³⁶

The idea of a replica persisted. In October and November 1971, the directors of the Plaza de la Raza accepted Siqueiros’s offer to donate a replacement central section of *América Tropical* to the people of Los Angeles, provided the Plaza de la Raza could raise the money for transport and materials.¹³⁷ In early 1972, LACMA and the Plaza de la Raza faction apparently reached an accommodation. Siqueiros agreed to create a new panel mural version of *América Tropical* that LACMA would display until the Plaza de la Raza had built a permanent home for it.¹³⁸ Siqueiros’s proposed 1972 visit to Los Angeles generated copious correspondence about who should host him and where. Goldman wrote LACMA with her proposal:

¹³⁴ Letter from Goldman to Siqueiros, page 1, September 19, 1970, Box 190, Folder 45, Goldman Papers.

¹³⁵ Mark Jones text, page 2, March 25, 1973, Box 190, Folder 36, Goldman Papers.

¹³⁶ Letter from Goldman to Mejia, May 1, 1971, Box 190, Folder 44, Goldman Papers.

¹³⁷ Letter from Goldman to Frank López, October 17, 1971 and letter from Ed Bonilla to Goldman, November 16, 1971, Box 190, Folders 43 and 42, respectively, Goldman Papers.

¹³⁸ Letter from Goldman to Siqueiros, March 11, 1972, Box 190, Folder 40, Goldman Papers.

Mechicano Art Center . . . has undertaken the whole responsibility for a reception of some 200 Chicano artists, writers, poets, some political leaders, intellectuals, etc. at Cal State L.A. for the last evening of Siqueiros's stay in L.A. . . . The Chicanos present at the reception will come from all over the state. My suggestions will be that the reception be jointly sponsored by Mechicano Art Center, Plaza de la Raza, and Goetz Gallery. . . . A Chicano press committee will be set up that will gather and funnel news to all Chicano media persons.¹³⁹

A good deal of maneuvering took place in both the Chicano and mainstream art communities to exploit the mural and its famous artist.

Siqueiros failed to complete the replacement mural panels despite his repeated assurances to the contrary. To complicate matters, a competing initiative to reproduce the mural surfaced in Mexico. A letter from Goldman to Raquel Tibol, a Mexico City-based art historian and critic and one of Siqueiros's biographers, relates Goldman's exasperation at the missed delivery date for the panels. In addition, she wrote, "I have . . . learned that Siqueiros was working on a much enlarged 'America Tropical' which was intended for some location in Mexico" and requested any information Tibol may have had on the matter.¹⁴⁰

All efforts, whether to reproduce *América Tropical* or preserve it, suffered a serious setback when Siqueiros died in 1974. The art world forgot about the Los Angeles mural while it mounted retrospectives of Siqueiros's work. Looking back, the replacement initiative had supplanted efforts to preserve the mural, Goldman admitted in a 1978 letter:

There was not sufficient interest at the time [1971] in a preservation, especially since the artist volunteered to re-do the central portion of the mural on portable panels and present it as a gift to the people of Los Angeles. Many people came forward at that time, including art collectors, art dealers, trustees of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (where the new mural was to be displayed for six

¹³⁹ Letter from Goldman to Ben, page 1, January 14, 1972, Box 190, Folder 37, Goldman Papers.

¹⁴⁰ Letter from Goldman to Tibol, April 15, 1973, Box 190, Folder 36, Goldman Papers.

months) and representatives of the Chicano community, to underwrite the costs. . . . Lamentably, the whole question of preservation was lost sight of.¹⁴¹

Goldman and her committee turned to raising funds for a protective covering for the wall.¹⁴²

By the mid-1970s, after Siqueiros's death, Goldman's coalition began to fade. In an angry letter to the State Historical Site manager, Goldman indicates that plans had been made without her input to restore or replicate the mural. Her letter insists that this not be done out of respect for Siqueiros's wishes. She copied Castellanos, González, and López, among others.¹⁴³ In 1976 she wrote to both Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and California Governor Edmund Brown, Jr. to enlist their support for the project (apparently without effect).¹⁴⁴ Copies of the letter went to several LACMA staff members, but only to González from the original committee. The other two gallery directors showed no further interest.

Goldman did not give up. A 1980 letter reopened the subject of whether to conserve or restore the mural and contemplated the production of another film, *América Tropical II*, to document restoration or conservation activities.¹⁴⁵ That year, a budget estimated a total of \$32,000 and three months needed for the conservation project, nearly laughable figures given the decades and millions of dollars the project ultimately required. Another two years passed before the "first meeting of the reactivated America Tropical Conservation Committee" took place on May 14, 1982. It included Goldman, Poole, and Luis Garza, among others.¹⁴⁶ Except for Goldman, none of the members of the original Siqueiros Mural Committee appear to have

¹⁴¹ Letter from Goldman to Poole, pages 1-2, October 2, 1978, Box 190, Folder 6, Goldman Papers.

¹⁴² Letter from Goldman to Governor Edmund Brown, Jr., page 1, March 29, 1976, Box 190, Folder 35, Goldman Papers.

¹⁴³ Letter from Goldman to John H. Ward, page 1, May 12, 1975, Box 190, Folder 35, Goldman Papers.

¹⁴⁴ Letters Goldman to Bradley and Brown, April and March 1976, Box 190, Folder 35, Goldman Papers.

¹⁴⁵ Letter from Mejia to Goldman, page 1, February 15, 1980, Box 190, Folder 4, Goldman Papers.

¹⁴⁶ Letter from Poole to Goldman, May 10, 1982, Box 190, Folder 6, Goldman Papers.

participated. The *Los Angeles Times* lent its support, indicating the mural project was being held up by the cost, now estimated at \$75,000, and “the opposition of some Olvera Street merchants.”¹⁴⁷ The delays adversely affected the mural. Despite efforts to shelter it, *América Tropical* continued to be exposed to the elements. An architectural historian writing in 1981 described the plastic protective sheeting, “replaced twice,” in tatters, offering little protection. The same article blamed the lack of progress on Wacker Chemicals’ delay in formulating the appropriate materials.¹⁴⁸ A conservator told Poole that “70% of the original work has been lost in the past ten years” and recommended steps to better protect the mural.¹⁴⁹

During the late 1980s, changes in Olvera Street’s fortunes added to the challenges the mural faced. In 1989, the City Parks and Recreation Department took over management of Olvera Street from the state, county, and city commission that had managed the area since 1953.¹⁵⁰ A 1981 architectural society newsletter commented on the complex and highly politicized decision-making that plagued the area:

[T]he bureaucratic problems of management in El Pueblo [State Historical Park] are nightmarish in proportion, and not surprisingly, preservation of the resources has occasionally been compromised. [The situation is] compounded by the more esoteric problem of what to preserve, for El Pueblo is actually an eclectic combination of physical, historical, and cultural resources created as much by myth as by reality.¹⁵¹

Simplified leadership made little difference. Squabbles arose between the administration and Olvera Street merchants. Historian Rodolfo Acuña, for example, felt Poole used *América*

¹⁴⁷ “Saving a Fading Mural,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1982, C6.

¹⁴⁸ Richard Rowe, “On Olvera Street: One Vision Realized, Another Whitewashed,” *Southern California Chapter of Society of Architectural Historians Review* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1981): 7, in Album 360, Goldman Papers.

¹⁴⁹ Letter from Myrna Saxe to Jean Bruce Poole, page 1, January 27, 1982, Box 190, Folder 2, Goldman Papers.

¹⁵⁰ “Parks,” *LA Mountains*, n.d., www.lamountains.com; Estrada, *Los Angeles’s Olvera Street*, 51–52, 91–92.

¹⁵¹ Roger Hatheway, “El Pueblo: Myths and Realities,” *Southern California Chapter of Society of Architectural Historians Review* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1981): 1, in Album 360, Goldman Papers.

Tropical for political gain.¹⁵² The city embarked on redevelopment plans. Olvera Street merchants presented an alternative to the city's plans, embracing the preservation of *América*

Tropical.¹⁵³ The Merchants Association rallied their constituency for a protest on June 11, 1990:

OLVERA STREET's future is now in danger. Different ethnic groups who have never helped to maintain the area now seek a piece of the action. They claim their groups have as much of a right to **OLVERA STREET** as the Mexican community. This is not correct nor is it fair. We have struggled to preserve our Mexican heritage on **OLVERA STREET**. . . . We are fighting influential politicians and heavy handed business interests who wish to exploit the area.¹⁵⁴

Ultimately, the merchants prevailed and the city scrapped its development plans; but, again, valuable time had been lost: *América Tropical* continued to deteriorate.

While the arguments continued over the fate of Olvera Street, in 1988 Jean Bruce Poole convinced the Getty Conservation Institute to become involved in the preservation effort.¹⁵⁵

Goldman, however, seems to have been shut out. In a 1996 letter to the Getty team she objected:

[T]here was no communication with me about how the preservation and protection of the mural were going. I have had to discover such information from third parties. . . . [I am concerned] about the historical accuracy and social contextualization of the didactic portion of the display to accompany the mural.¹⁵⁶

Notes from a call with a member of the team convey Goldman's frustration, as she criticizes almost every aspect of the project: "[Irene] Herner's scholarship . . . is faulty;" the exhibit design team is headed by a Sanskrit scholar; the team has no Chicano or Latino leadership.¹⁵⁷

Nevertheless, once the Getty stepped in, the pace improved. According to Poole, "[The Getty]

¹⁵² Rodolfo Acuña, "History Is People, Not Bricks," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1990.

¹⁵³ Rodolfo Acuña, *Anything but Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1996), 24–26.

¹⁵⁴ "Save Olvera Street" flyer, June 11, 1990, Box 193, Folder 26, Goldman Papers.

¹⁵⁵ Leslie Rainer, "The Conservation of América Tropical: Historical Context and Project Overview," in *The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving the Artist's Monumental Murals* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2012), 6.

¹⁵⁶ Letter from Goldman to Francesca Piqué, page 1, January 25, 1996, Box 193, Folder 19, Goldman Papers.

¹⁵⁷ Notes from call Goldman and Rainer, pages 1-2, January 18, 1996, Box193, Folder 22, Goldman Papers.

had the resources and expertise to get the job done as well as the prestige to persuade city authorities of the artwork's importance."¹⁵⁸ The Getty and the city raised \$4.5 million from the J. Paul Getty Trust, the National Endowment for the Arts, and others.¹⁵⁹

The Getty had taken on a formidable project. Damage from the 1971 earthquake and several smaller ones had never been repaired, and the whole of Italian Hall required seismic stabilization, a costly project completed in 1995.¹⁶⁰ That year, the Getty team found the mural in terrible condition: "Sadly, the mural's paint layer today is almost non-existent."¹⁶¹ In the end, the painstaking work of removing layers of roofing tar and whitewash, cleaning, and reattaching loose pieces of the mural surface took twenty-two years.¹⁶²

By 2000, rumors circulated of an imminent unveiling. For the Democratic Convention in Los Angeles that year, a temporary exhibition showcased the preservation effort. Organizers declared only an interpretive center, viewing platform, and protective awning remained to complete the project—if they could find the money to pay for them.¹⁶³ The city and the Getty contributed another \$4 million each.¹⁶⁴ The groundbreaking for the Visitor Center took place in 2000, under Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, the first Los Angeles mayor of Mexican descent since 1858. A protective awning encases the mural to keep wind, rain, and environmental hazards at bay; but, more importantly, it obscures City Hall's view of the mural (Figure 37). *América Tropical* opened to the public in 2012.

¹⁵⁸ Suzanne Muchnic, "A 30-Year Rescue Mission," *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 2000, www.latimes.com.

¹⁵⁹ Muchnic, "A Tangled Tale."

¹⁶⁰ "Conservation of América Tropical by David Alfaro Siqueiros" Project Fact Sheet (City of Los Angeles, c. 1996), n.p., in Box 191, Folder 40, Goldman Papers.

¹⁶¹ F. Piqué, et al., "Original Technique," page 367.

¹⁶² Rainer, "The Conservation of América Tropical," 7.

¹⁶³ Muchnic, "A 30-Year Rescue Mission."

¹⁶⁴ Augustin Gurza, "Olvera Street Mural 'America Tropical' May See the Light of Day," *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 2008, www.latimes.com.

Conclusion

For centuries, the Xipe Totec ritual renewed bonds between pre-Columbian Mesoamericans and their deities. Blood sacrifice acknowledged the gods' suffering on behalf of the people, and, through the victim's flayed skin, transformed priest into deity. The rotting skin marked the passage of time until conditions became right to plant maize. As the crop matured and provided food for the people, the gods fulfilled their obligations, and the cycle began again.

Another cycle of sacrifice and redemption occurs in the story of David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*. In 1932, at a time when Anglos' dreams for Los Angeles's future silenced the city's Mexican-Americans, Siqueiros spilled paint instead of blood in a location laden with significance. Coats of whitewash inadvertently preserved and sanctified the mural. The whitewash decayed, marking the passage of time until conditions were right for the Chicano movement. In *América Tropical*'s imagery, Siqueiros's history, and the tale of the mural's creation and destruction, activists discovered seeds to cultivate Mexican-American empowerment. Chicanos reciprocated the gifts of *América Tropical* with acts of protection and remembering, enabling the mural's daring protest on behalf of peoples oppressed and destroyed by imperialism to reach across the decades and take a place in Los Angeles's cultural landscape.

Figures



Figure 1: Aztec Culture, *Xipe Totec*, 1300-1600, ceramic
Reproduced from slides.art.tcu.edu

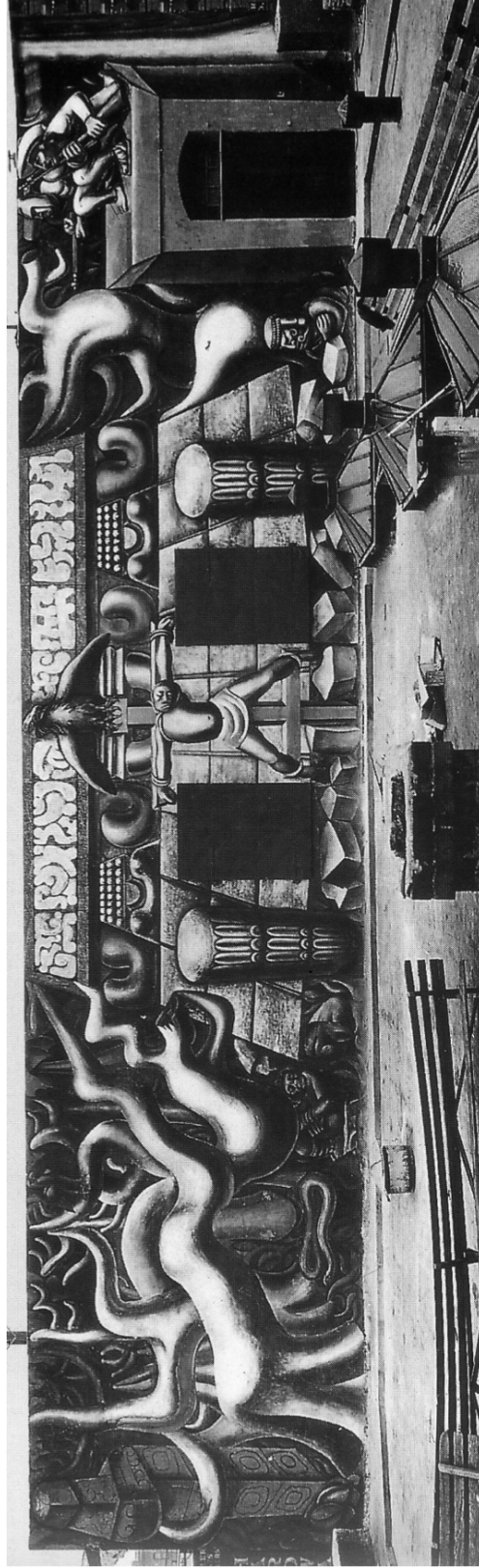


Figure 2: David Alfaro Siqueiros, *América Tropical: Oprimida y Destrozada por los Imperialismos*, 1932 (1932 photograph), Los Angeles, CA, fresco, 19 ³/₄ x 98 ³/₈ feet
Reproduced from www.studyblue.com



Figure 3: Felice Beato, *Executed Sokichi*,
c. 1867, photograph, 11 ³/₈ x 9 in.
Reproduced from www.luminous-lint.com

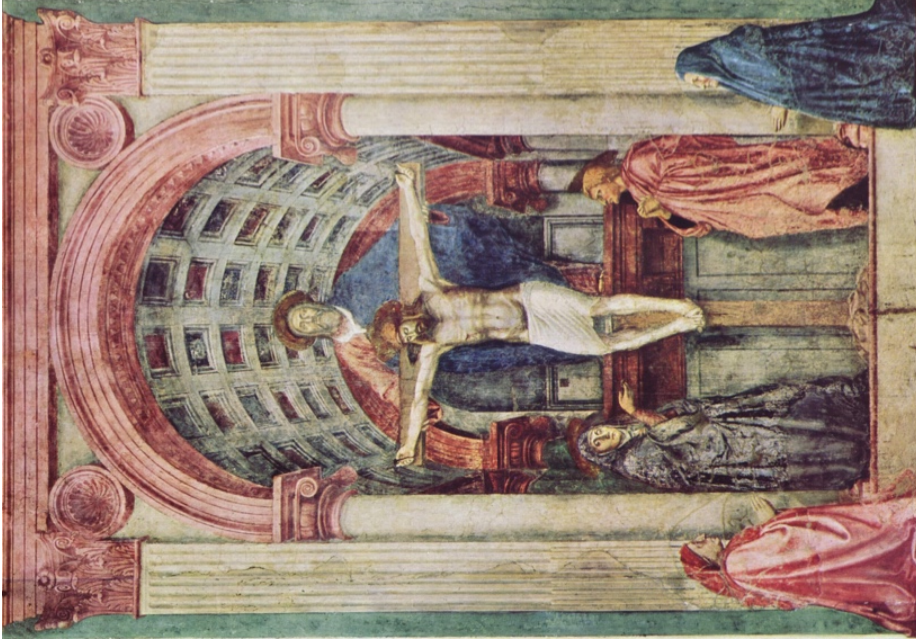


Figure 4: Masaccio, *The Holy Trinity*, c. 1427, Santa Maria
Novella, Florence, Italy, fresco, 22 x 10 ¹/₂ feet
Photo by The Yorck Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei
Reproduced from commons.wikimedia.org



Figure 5: U.S. Mint, Eagle designs on U.S. Dollar, Half-Dollar, and Quarter Coins, c. 1932. The quarter design on the far right entered circulation in August 1932. Reproduced from coinsite.com



Figure 6: Imperial Roman Culture, Ornament with Eagle, 0-100, gold, approx. 3 x 2 in. Cleveland Art Museum. Reproduced from www.clevelandart.org



Figure 7: Hapsburg Double-Headed Eagle, c. 1750, gold, pearls, and precious stones, approx. 3 x 3 in. Munich Residence Treasury. Photo by the author



Figure 8: Jacques-Louis David, *Serment de l'armée fait à l'Empereur après la distribution des aigles, 5 décembre, 1804*, (*The Army's Oath to the Emperor after the Distribution of the Eagle Standards, December 5, 1804*), 1810, oil on canvas, 20 x 30 ½ feet

Photo by Google Art Project

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Figure 9: Aztec Culture, *Eagle Warrior*, 1300-1600, ceramic Museo del Templo Mayor
Reproduced from commons.wikimedia.org



Figure 10: Post-conquest Aztec Culture, *Codex Mendoza*, 1541, manuscript painting on European paper Bodleian Libraries
Reproduced from commons.wikimedia.org



Figure 11: Juan Manuel Gabino Villascán, Flag of Mexico, 1917
Reproduced from commons.wikimedia.org

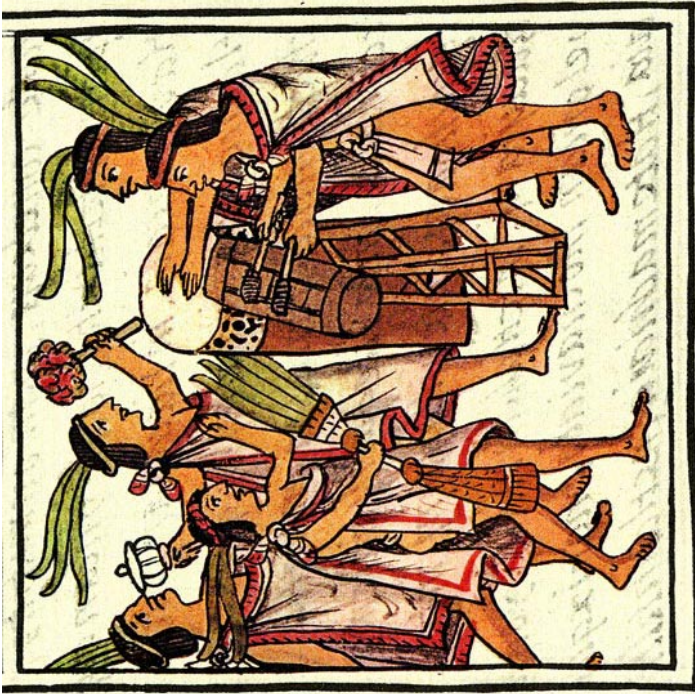


Figure 12: Post-conquest Aztec Culture, *Florentine Codex*, 1545-1569, paint on European paper
World Digital Library
Reproduced from commons.wikimedia.org



Figure 13: Terminal Classic Maya Culture, *Tzompantli* (skull rack), Chichen Itzá, Mexico, 800-900, stone
Reproduced from www.fullscreen360.com



Figure 14: Teotihuacan Culture, *Great Goddess*, Teotihuacan, Mexico, 400-650, fresco
Photo by Thomas Aleto
Reproduced from commons.wikimedia.org



Figure 15: Late Classic Maya Culture, *Pacal's Sarcophagus Lid*, 683, Palenque, Mexico, limestone, 12 1/2 x 7 feet
Reproduced from slides.art.tcu.edu



Figure 16: Anonymous Artist(s), Altarpiece, 1751-58, Santa Prisca de Taxco, Mexico, gold leaf over plaster
Reproduced from www.visitmexico.com



Figure 17: Post-conquest Aztec Culture, *Codex Ixtlixochitl*, 1550, paint on European paper
World Digital Library
Reproduced from commons.wikimedia.org

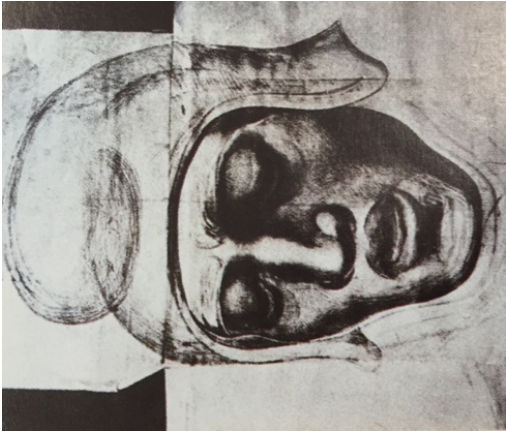


Figure 18: David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Head of a Revolutionary*, 1922, pencil drawing
Reproduced from *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*, Plate 7

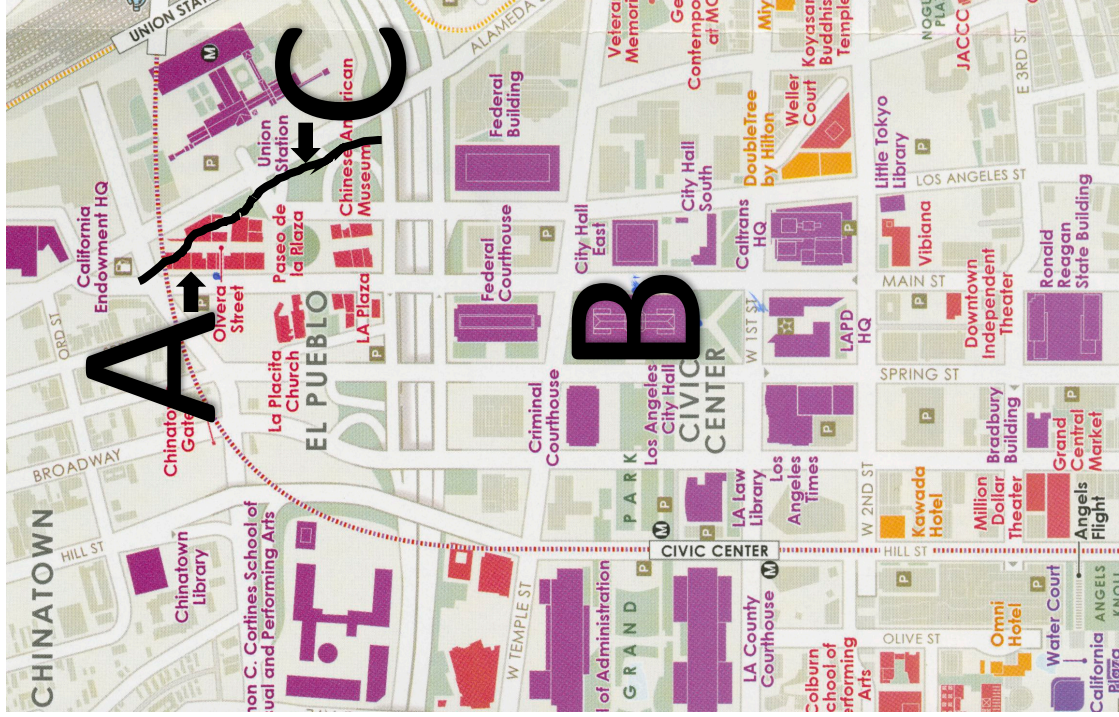


Figure 20: Moreton Bay fig trees, March 8, 2016, Paseo de la Plaza
Photo by the author



Figure 19: Luis C. Garza, digital color reconstruction of *América Tropical*, 2010
Reproduced from remezcla.com

Figure 21: Map of Central Los Angeles showing location of *América Tropical* (A), City Hall (B), Zanja Madre (C), and San Gabriel Mountains (D).
 Reproduced from Downtown Center Business Improvement District
 “Downtown LA Welcome Map”



D San Gabriel Mountains



Figure 22: Views of the side of Italian Hall from Olvera Street (top) and Main Street (bottom), March 8, 2016
Photos by the author

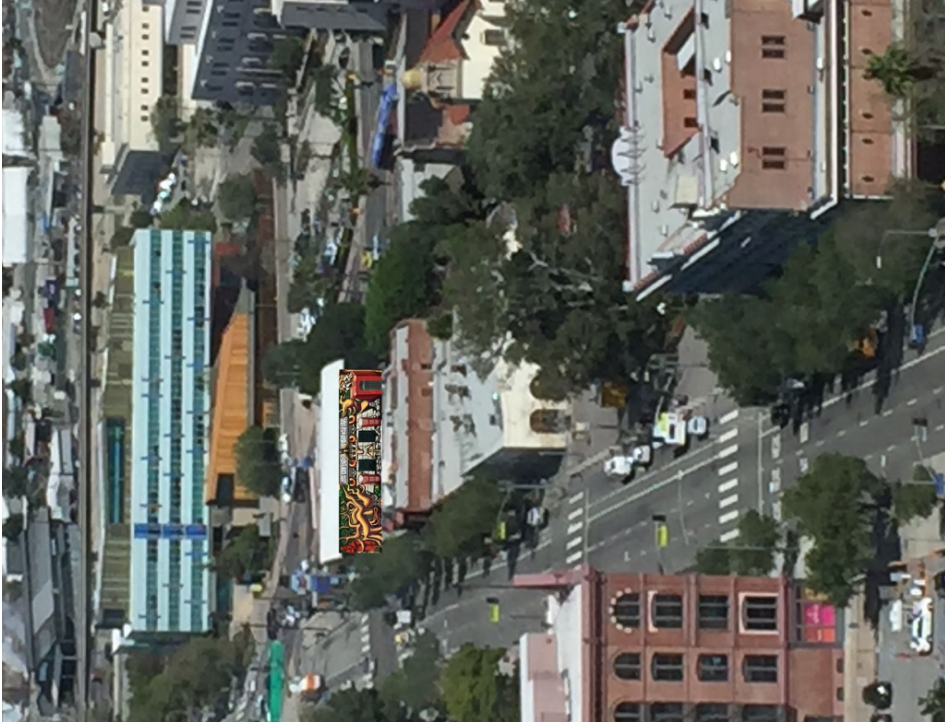


Figure 23: View from Los Angeles City Hall Observation Deck looking north, with colorized version of *América Tropical* superimposed on the side of Italian Hall, March 8, 2016
Photo and digital enhancement by the author

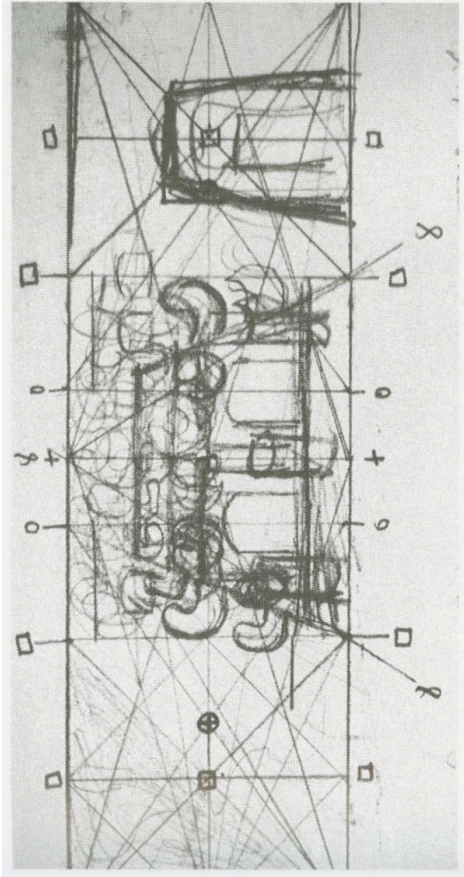


Figure 24: David Alfaro Siqueiros, preliminary sketch for *América Tropical*, 1932, pencil or graphite on paper, approximately 8 ½ x 11 in. Reproduced from *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros*



Figure 25: Anonymous Artist, Gibbs Bros. Electric Co., 1938, photograph, approximately 8 ½ x 11 in. Goldman Papers, University of California, Santa Barbara
 Reproduced from University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Special Collections



Figure 26: Judy Baca and Las Vistas Nuevas, *Mi Abuelita (My Grandmother)*, c. 1971, paint on stucco
Reproduced from *Give Me Life*



Figure 27: Eduardo Carrillo, Ramses Noriega, Saul Solache, and Sergio Hernández, *Chicano History*, 1970, mural
Reproduced from museoeduardocarrillo.org

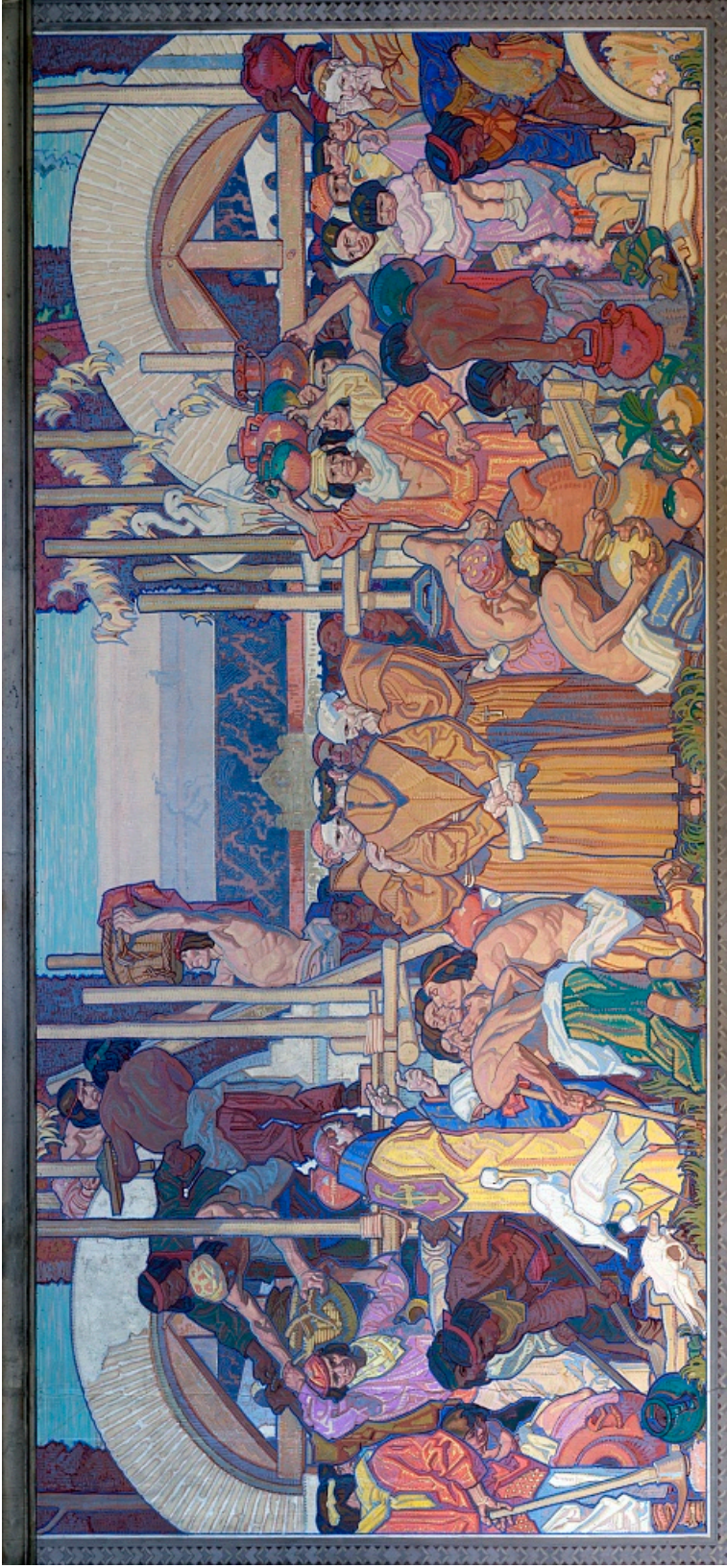


Figure 28: Dean Cornwell, *Mission Building*, from *Great Eras of California History*, 1929-1933, oil on canvas
The Jon B. Lovelace Collection of California Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America Project, Library of
Congress, Prints and Photographs Division
Reproduced from www.loc.gov



Figure 29: José Juárez, *Virgin of Guadalupe with Apparitions*, 1656, oil on canvas, 82 ³/₄ x 116 ¹/₄
 Reproduced from slides.art.tcu.edu



Figure 30: Willie Herrón III, *The Wall that Cracked Open*, 1972, mural
 Reproduced from *Signs of the Heart*



Figure 31 : Anonymous Artist, *América Tropical* emerging from whitewash, c. 1971, photograph Goldman Papers, University of California, Santa Barbara
Reproduced from University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Special Collections



Figure 32: Sergio O'Cadiz, *History and Evolution of the Chicano in the United States*, 1974, sketch for mural
 Reproduced from www.kcet.org



Figure 33: Barbara Carrasco, *History of Los Angeles, A Mexican Perspective*, 1981-83, portable mural
 Reproduced from *Signs of the Heart*

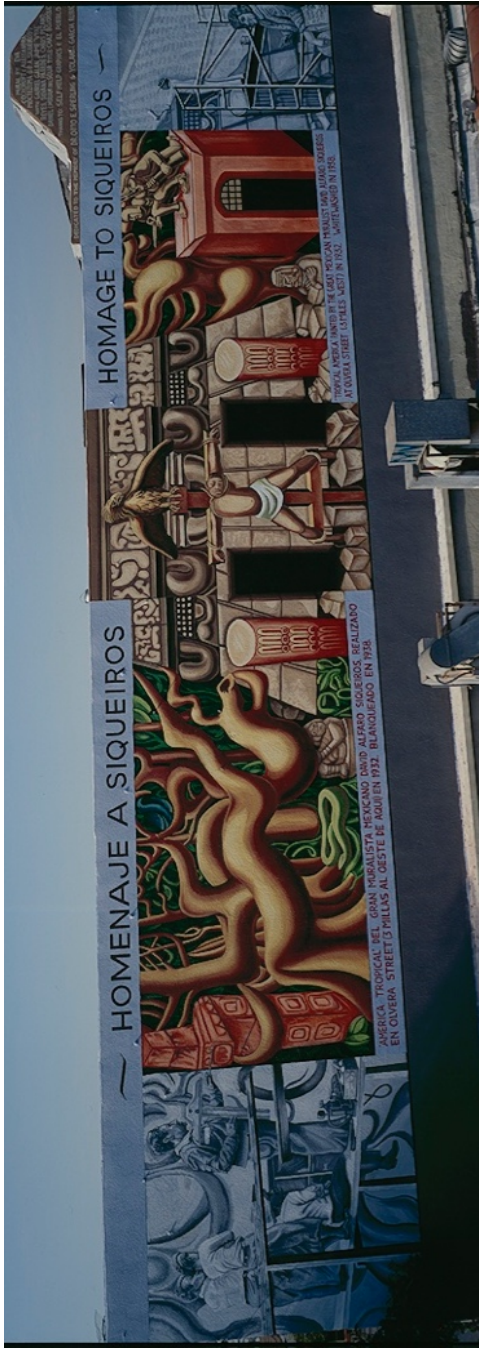


Figure 34: Eva Cockcroft and Alessandra Moctezuma, *Homage to Siqueiros*, 1998, mural
Reproduced from murallocator.org



Figure 35: John Zender Estrada, *Homage to Mexican Masters*, 2003, mural
Reproduced from *Give Me Life*



Figure 36: Willie Herrón III and others, *La Voz de la Gente, La Resurrección de Cuauhtémoc en las Américas: Homenaje a David Alfaro Siqueiros (The People's Voice, Cuauhtémoc's Resurrection in the Americas: Homage to David Alfaro Siqueiros)*, 2012, mural
 Reproduced from *Give Me Life*



Figure 37: View from Los Angeles City Hall Observation Deck looking North, March 8, 2016, protective awning flagged by arrow
 Photo by the author

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Abstract

In 1932, David Alfaro Siqueiros painted a dramatic mural that confronted Los Angeles with a powerful condemnation of imperialism. Although art historians have long treated the mural as a footnote in Siqueiros's career, *América Tropical: Oprimida y Destrozada por los Imperialismos* (*Tropical America: Oppressed and Destroyed by Imperialisms*) stands out as one of his boldest political statements. The authorities responded by requiring Siqueiros to leave the United States and whitewashing the image. In the late 1960s, the whitewash began to peel, and *América Tropical* reemerged to contribute to the Chicano movement, another chapter in Mexican-Americans' ongoing efforts to define their community's identity and assume a place in Los Angeles's power structure. Chicano activists embraced the mural, with its particular history and extraordinary content, as a symbol for their past and present struggles. *América Tropical* became part of Chicano mural iconography even as Chicanos worked to preserve its remains.

Art historical scholarship on Siqueiros focuses on his politics and his innovative materials and techniques. *América Tropical* receives little attention. Chicana activist and art historian Shifra Goldman's 1974 "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles" includes the only formal analysis of the mural and the most comprehensive investigation of its making and destruction. Chicano art scholarship identifies Siqueiros, the only Mexican muralist alive and active in the late 1960s, as a particularly strong influence on the movement's visual arts, but *América Tropical* amounts to an historical curiosity.

My exploration of the relationship between *América Tropical* and Chicano activism relies on primary sources, including the Siqueiros Papers at the Getty Research Institute and Chicano artists', activists', and art historians' archives. I first examine the environment that led to the 1932 mural's creation. Part of this discussion challenges accepted accounts of the patrons' intent

as well as previous interpretations of the mural's formal qualities and meaning. I then turn to the emergence of the Chicano movement and the events of the mural's rediscovery to consider how *América Tropical* operated as an icon. Finally, I show how Chicanos preserved *América Tropical's* legacy through their art and by returning the 1932 mural to public view.