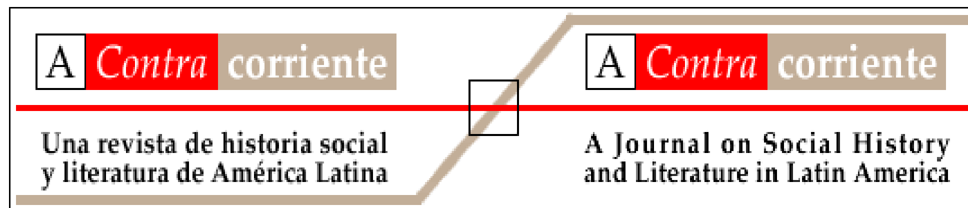

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Review/Reseña

Anna Indych-López, *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009.

Muralists, Patrons, and Markets: Promoting Mexican Art in the US

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Anna Indych-López's new book *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* is an invaluable contribution to the burgeoning literature on Mexican muralism. Published as part of the University of Pittsburgh Press's Illuminations: Cultural Formations of the Americas series, the book examines Diego Rivera's, José Clemente Orozco's, and David Alfaro Siqueiros' non-mural or portable fresco projects in the United States, a topic that has until now been overlooked in the literature. According to Indych-López the muralists executed works in small-scale media as a strategy for attracting mural

commissions, a technique which met with intermittent success. The book analyzes the intricacies of patronage, institutional politics, collecting practices, and critical reception of these works in the United States, and considers how the intricacies of transnational politics inflected the decisions made by artists, patrons, and museums. While Indych-López grounds her arguments in a nuanced discussion of historical context, she never neglects the art itself. She writes in a lucid and accessible style, which is at its best in the formal description and interpretation of individual works of art. This detailed formal analysis bolsters her contention that the muralists adapted the iconography and composition of their work to appeal to U.S. audiences.

Organized into five chapters that function independently but are linked by a common theme, the book follows a chronological order of events. The first chapter after the introduction focuses on Orozco's series of drawings of the Mexican Revolution known as "Los Horrores." According to Indych-López the series represents the first attempt by any of the muralists to adapt his work to the expectations of U.S. audiences. Her discussion relies heavily on new information about the commission derived from Anita Brenner's diaries. In this chapter Indych-López pays particular attention to Brenner's role in the process of reputation building, analyzing her promotion of the series, writings about the artist, and her emerging vision of Mexican art. Through a comparison of Orozco's murals at the National Preparatory School and the images he adapted for his series, Indych-López demonstrates how the drawings deviate from what she calls the "story of national redemption" in the murals to reveal a more overtly violent image of the Revolution. She situates the development and promotion of the drawings within the context of complex U.S.-Mexican relations in the post-revolutionary period, arguing that Orozco's images originally were not well received in the United States because they too closely resembled photographs of the fighting disseminated as postcards or in the press. By locating Orozco's series within the larger context of contemporary visual culture, Indych-López presents a detailed picture of how these images signified when they were first introduced.

Indych-López's discussion of the series in relation to collective storytelling and historical memory is particularly interesting. She contends that the fragmented nature of the images emulated the disjointed quality of memory and that the series consequently challenges the classificatory boundaries between art and historical document. This ambiguity further contributed to audiences' uneasiness with the imagery. While convincing, this argument could have been enhanced by relating the specific case of "Los Horrores" to the substantial body of theoretical literature on the topic of historical memory. These theories elucidate just how images from a range of visual media help to construct a shared vision of the past and inspire empathy and social responsibility, particularly in the case of traumatic memories of war and violence. It was perhaps Orozco's awareness of his role in constructing collective memory that led to subsequent revisions of his drawings as he converted some of them into lithographs. By tracing the subtle changes from drawing to lithograph, Indych-López demonstrates how, through his elimination of certain images and toning down of the more brutal scenes, Orozco was able to develop a reputation in the United States. These lithographs proved to be much more palatable to a U.S. audience. One is left wondering, however, whether these modified images resonated more closely with pre-formed memories of Revolution, or whether they actually contributed to a shift in how these events were construed.

In the subsequent chapter, "Mexican Curios," Indych-López transitions from focusing on a body of work to examining institutional display practice. Central to her discussion is the exhibition "Mexican Arts" held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1930. Unfortunately, many of the fascinating and instructive photographs of museum installations, published here for the first time, were so small that it was difficult to perceive detail. While most likely limited by the size of the book itself, if reproduced at a larger scale, these photographs would have better served Indych-López's discussion of exhibition design. The exhibition collapsed five hundred years of Mexican history, presenting in the same space pre-Columbian objects, folk art, and modern art. According to Indych-López, expectations of cultural nationalism shaped the selection of objects,

installation, and reception of the exhibition. For Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros, who all contributed works to the exhibition, it presented an opportunity to reach new audiences who did not have access to site-specific murals, while simultaneously exacerbating their intense rivalry.

Indych-López breaks her discussion of "Mexican Arts" into several components, focusing on patronage, formal comparisons, reception, and broader exhibition practice in the United States. In her presentation of patronage, she looks specifically at the role of the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow, in shaping the exhibition. In 1929 Morrow had commissioned Rivera to paint a mural cycle in the former palace of Hernán Cortés in Cuernavaca. He was also a major patron of "Mexican Arts," using the exhibition to harness Mexican culture as a means to ease political tensions and to transform the negative image the United States held of revolutionary Mexico. In addition to Morrow, Indych-López explores the corporate funding of the exhibition, the origins of key loans, and marketing decisions to reveal the complex economic and political factors that influenced such an ambitious endeavor. This information provides a nuanced vision of the myriad forces that shaped the final presentation of "Mexican Arts."

To the exhibition Rivera submitted a portable fresco, *Market Scene*, as a surrogate for his Cuernavaca murals that could not be transported to New York. In a close analysis of *Market Scene*, Indych-López highlights Rivera's modifications in format and subject matter from the original mural, and the impact these decisions had on how audiences interpreted the imagery. She then broadens her inquiry to relate the emphasis on folk art in "Mexican Arts" to the burgeoning interest in Mexican folk art and craft in the United States, promoted primarily by Frances Flynn Paine. According to Indych-López, it was the colonial revival movement in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s that established an environment in which audiences could appreciate Mexican art. In other words, an intensifying pan-Americanism facilitated the construction of parallel Mexican and U.S. national identities based on notions of heritage and folklore. The consequence of this emphasis on the folkloric was that curators presented modern art as an extension of folk and applied arts

rather than as an artistic practice in its own right. Indych-López thus argues that the exhibition, while successful in replacing the idea of the Mexican bandit with a vision of Mexico as picturesque and primitive in the popular imagination, tended to present modern Mexican art as derivative and led to no future mural commissions.

In her chapter entitled "Mural Gambits," Indych-López expounds on the retrospective exhibition of Rivera's work held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1931. For the exhibition Rivera created a series of eight portable frescoes "made to order" for the U.S. public. By analyzing the debates in the press surrounding Rivera's art and politics, and the critical reception of the portable frescoes, Indych-López reveals how muralism was understood and promoted in the United States. Because Rivera's tactic failed to generate mural commissions and the frescoes themselves took a long time finding buyers, she contends that the technique was not commercially viable. By looking in intricate detail at Rivera's artistic process and choice to isolate individual scenes from extant murals in Mexico, Indych-López demonstrates how Rivera toned down political content for his U.S. audience. Nevertheless, responses in the press indicated that these fragments of larger compositions were inadequate surrogates for entire mural cycles.

The final chapter examines the exhibition "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art" held at the Museum of Modern art in 1940. By comparing this exhibition with "Mexican Arts" a decade earlier, Indych-López traces the shift in perceptions of Mexican art and culture. Unlike "Mexican Arts," the exhibition at MoMA acknowledged the contributions of European art forms on the development of Mexican art, rather than presenting Mexican modernism as simply an elaboration of folk art. The exhibition featured Orozco's *Dive Bomber and Tank*, made specifically for the show. Indych-López argues convincingly that Orozco's piece was a response to Rivera's failed experiments with the portable fresco medium in 1931. The mural, constructed of six interchangeable panels, emulates the fragmented process of viewing a full size mural, rather than simply magnifying or condensing an isolated scene as Rivera did.

In her discussion of Rivera's contributions to "Twenty Centuries," Indych-López notes that reviews criticized his work as not being political enough. With the public's increased knowledge of Mexican art over the past decade, audiences expected political controversy. Thus, according to Indych-López, Rivera was not condemned for his association with communism, but rather because he did not live up to his radical proclamations. Indeed, one of the book's most important arguments is its revision of the idea that U.S. institutions effectively depoliticized Mexican art. Indych-López successfully challenges the notion that U.S. cultural institutions could neutralize political art for their own purposes. While previous scholars have assumed that these institutions succeeded in depoliticizing Mexican art, Indych-López presents a convincing argument that their political agendas were not easily nor fully implemented, and moreover, that audiences became more sophisticated in detecting these practices over time. For Indych-López locating cultural diplomacy in the context of hemispheric relations and pan-American politics was an incomplete tool for interpreting muralism that led to flawed conclusions. She therefore displaces this practice with a close examination of display practice, patronage, critical reviews, and the artworks themselves to reveal a much more complex vision of Rivera's, Orozco's, and Siqueiros' role in U.S. art scene.

Muralism without Walls is a significant addition to the literature on Mexican modernism. While previous studies have focused almost exclusively on Rivera's, Siqueiros', and Orozco's mural production in Mexico and the United States, Indych-López's study presents an aspect of their artistic practice—their non-mural projects in the U.S.—that greatly enhances our understanding of these artists' participation in transnational cultural exchange. The chapter on Orozco's "Horrores" series, in its focus on an individual artist's body of work rather than an assembly of objects chosen by an institution, is distinct from the chapters that follow in organizational principle, yet serves as an excellent introduction to the challenges of marketing Mexican art to a U.S. audience. The subsequent three chapters, which form a more cohesive unit, evaluate individual exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art,

presenting a comparative analysis of the subtle changes in exhibition practice over time.

The book proposes astute hypotheses and develops them with substantial archival evidence, arriving at persuasive conclusions. Its revision and broadening of our understanding of Mexican muralism and the contexts in which it emerged represents a significant intervention in the field of modern Latin American art history.